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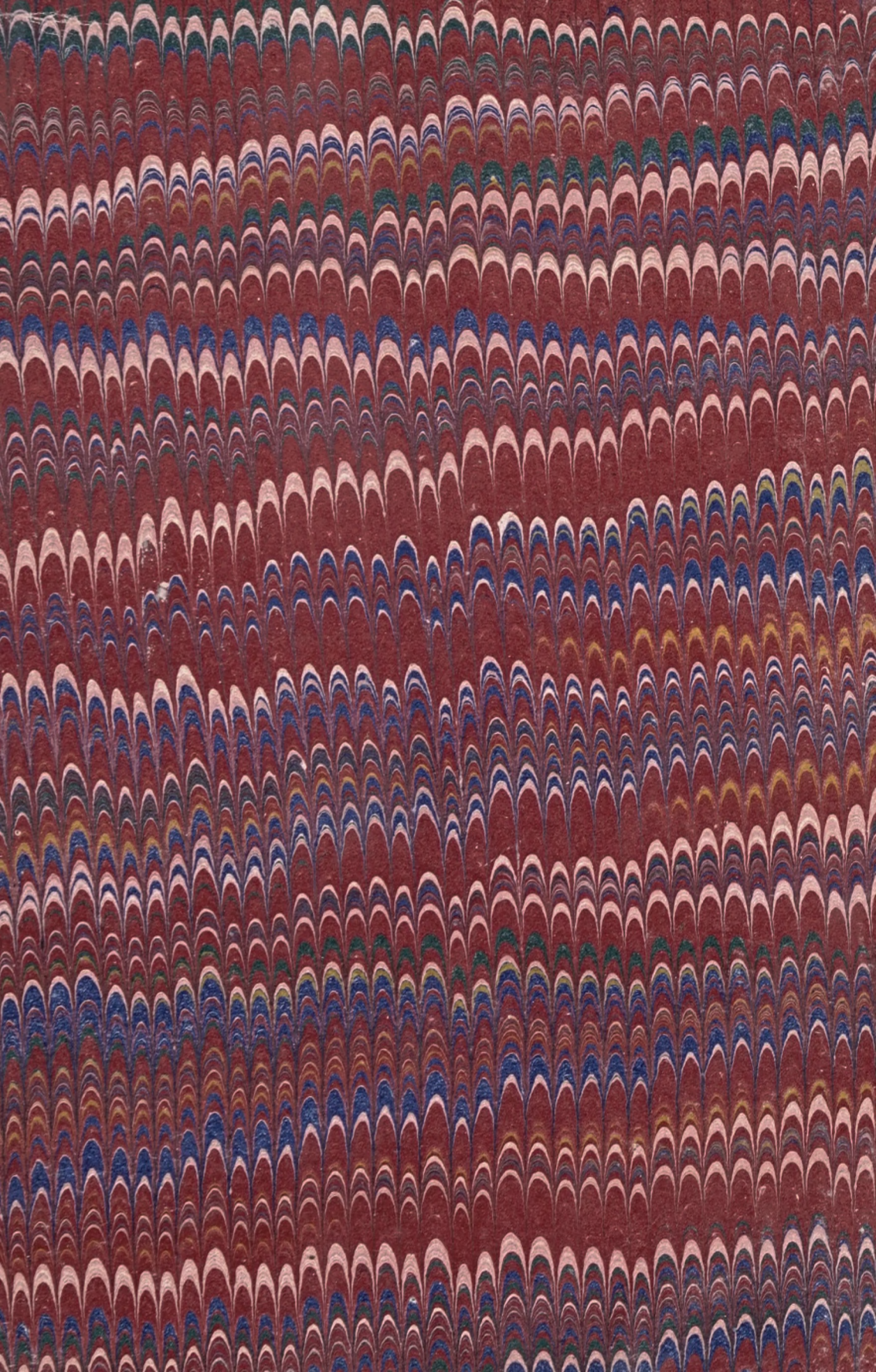
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RAYMONDE.

BY  
ANDRÉ THEURIET.



NEW YORK:  
D. APPLETON & COMPANY, PUBLISHERS.

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APPLETONS' NEW HANDY-VOLUME SERIES.

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# RAYMONDE.

*A TALE.*

✓  
BY

ANDRÉ THEURIET,

AUTHOR OF "GERARD'S MARRIAGE," "THE HOUSE OF THE TWO BARBELS,"  
"ANTOINETTE," ETC.



NEW YORK:  
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY,  
549 AND 551 BROADWAY.  
1878.



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# RAYMONDE.

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## I.

THE forest reveals to its votaries a thousand hidden charms entirely unknown to a Parisian whose daily walks are bounded by the Arc-de-Triomphe or the Tuileries. Mushroom-hunting is one of these impassioned pleasures whose rural flavor can be relished only by the initiated.

To set out at early morn for the woods steaming with dew ; to penetrate the forest obliquely traversed by the rosy illumination of the sunbeams ; there, in a stillness scarcely broken by a titmouse's twitter or a squirrel's nibble, to watch, with the scent of a dog trained to truffle-hunting and the devout respect of a gourmand, for the numerous varieties of mushrooms that have sprung up during a single summer night ; what keener and more innocent pleasure of its kind can be imagined ? It combines the essence and substance of human enjoyment, the excitement of the chase, the deli-



cate surprise of attaining the unexpected, and the hope, long anticipated, of an appetizing dish for the evening repast.

Professor Noël Hurtevant indulged in reflections like these, one July morning, while passing through the woods separating the valley of Auberive from the defile of Vivey. He sauntered in cheerful mood through the mushroom-bearing lands of the Fosses forest, with his basket on his arm and his dog following closely at his heels. The rain-storms had been frequent at the commencement of summer, and the whole cryptogamous race had prematurely developed under the influence of the warmth and moisture. The snow-balls abounded in the glades ; the heliotropes sparkled in the moss, like coins fresh from the mint ; and the barrel-shaped mushrooms rounded among the heath their brown backs, half devoured by insects. M. Noël, knife in hand, vigorously sniffed the morning air, dug up the grass, knelt down, and got up again with the nervous vivacity of a lean cat. From time to time, to increase the excitement, he called out to his dog :

“Come here, Vagabonde ! Didn’t you see that *coulmelle* opening its parasol among the St. John’s wort ? Well, you are like your sex—a great deal of noise and little work ! Why do you look at me so reproachfully ? I mean exactly what I say, you gay deceiver, and your lackadaisical looks will not change my mind !”



M. Noël was over sixty years old. He was small in stature and thin, and his whole person was nearly hidden under a long surtout, which, through the combined influence of sun and rain, presented every possible shade of faded green. His grayish beard grew like brushwood, and his white hair fell in disorder over his uneven shoulders. His nose with expanded nostrils, and his large mouth and projecting jawbones, gave to his countenance at first sight an appearance of vulgarity ; but a high forehead, and brown eyes with a profoundly sad, almost bitter expression, modified the disagreeable effect of the lower part of the face, and revealed the man who thought much and suffered much. Vagabonde, his dog, had the same common appearance ; but she redeemed this want of distinction by an expression of striking originality. She was a cross between a wolf and a fox ; her yellow coat spotted with black, her round, bushy tail, spread out like a plume, and especially her fine head, elongated and sly, with the tip of a gray nose, and malicious, glittering black eyes, betrayed her savage origin.

After receiving her master's reprimand, the dog went off with an affectation of humility, her tail between her legs, and her ears hanging down.

"Ah ! you are sulking," muttered the old man, shrugging his shoulders. "As you please ! . . . . It is of no use to be worried by such mincing manners in persons of your sex."



He silently resumed his search for mushrooms through the heat. Meantime the sun's rays grew more oppressive, and the basket, full to the brim, had grown heavy. M. Noël wiped his forehead, and looked round for a comfortable place to rest. He heard the murmur of a spring at a little distance in the direction of the declivity leading to Vivey, and turned his steps toward a clump of beech-trees at whose base the water had hollowed out for itself a reservoir. The moss-covered roots made a seat soft as could be desired, and the old man threw himself upon it, resting his forehead on his elbow.

"Oh for the elasticity of youth!" he sighed, stretching out his wearied limbs with painful effort. And by degrees, either from fatigue or sadness, his countenance lengthened and assumed a sorrowful expression.

His head, bent forward by the position in which he was lying, was reflected in the water, darkened by water-cresses growing at the bottom, and his glance, fixed in melancholy mood upon the mirror of the spring, became more and more dreamy. By a singular effect of optics or imagination, the reflection that he saw cradled in the water was suddenly transformed and took on the lineaments of youth. Instead of the countenance of an old man with pinched features and grayish skin, he discerned little by little, at the bottom of the reservoir framed in mints, a



beardless face with eager eyes and brown hair—his own face when he was twenty years old ; and insensibly, through his waking dream, the memories of former days were pictured on the green water.

He recognized himself, a graduate of the Normal School, in a restaurant of the Palais Royal, where his classmates were giving a feast in honor of their leader, the winner of the highest prizes ; and this triumphant leader was himself, Noël. He saw again the *salon* with its gilt mouldings, adorned with lofty mirrors, in which rows of gas-lights were reflected farther than the eye could reach ; he heard the clinking of the glasses as they touched each other, and the enthusiastic toasts, to which he replied in a voice choked with emotion. How many ambitious projects, how many glorious dreams mounted then like champagne in golden beads into his excited brain ! He was young, healthy, and full of hope. He lived in that summer of life when the fruits of illusion still hang upon the branches of the enchanted tree ; the sun is ready to ripen them, and all that seems necessary is to stretch out the hand and gather them.

At this very moment, the dog, tired of sulking, planted herself directly in front of her master. Seated on her hind legs, with her nose upturned, her tail wagging, and her eyes full of tender inquiry, she seemed to say : “ What good does it



do to think about these things?" But M. Noël paid no attention to her, and buried himself deeper than ever in his dreams. Once more she tried to attract his attention by an expressive barking, and then, raising one foot, she suddenly scratched the dreamer's knee. M. Noël did not even turn his head. Out of all patience, the dog began to snap at a series of imaginary flies, with cracking of the jaw and comic contortions. At last, vexed at having lavished to no purpose all her accomplishments for her master's entertainment, she threw herself heavily on the ground with an air of deep discouragement, while giving utterance to a melancholy howl.

The forest, animated in all directions, lulled M. Noël's meditations with its confused and harmonious murmuring. Thousands of insects buzzed among the briars, the woodpeckers hammered with their beaks on the bark of the beech-trees, and the jays chattered in the branches. Suddenly, from the depths of a village buried in a hollow of the valley, the sound of silver-toned bells was wafted through the forest. It was a loud and merry peal, like the music for a marriage festival. M. Noël listened, shook his long, white hair, and gave out a plaintive sigh.

Did you ever chance to find the lost key of an old-fashioned chest of drawers that had been shut up for many years, and succeed after infinite pains in pushing the bolt of the rusty lock? The



drawer, opened with great effort, reveals hiding-places full of old treasures, still arranged as they were left half a century ago. It is a resurrection; the letters yellow with age, the books with worm-eaten pages, the ribbons with the colors all faded out, the smelling-bottle still impregnated with a perfume now out of use—all these old things are the sweet and sad ghosts of a vanished world.

Alas ! each one of us carries in a corner of his heart one of these secret drawers, full of relics with bitter perfume ; no one suspects its existence, and the hiding-place remains forgotten for years, until some accident reveals the key that opens the rusty lock.

The distant music of the bells was for M. Noël the magic sesame throwing open the mysterious and long-closed door of the past.

Was the current of the spring disturbed, or did a misty vapor pass over the old man's eyes? He saw in the reservoir nothing but sand and mud, and he thought with disgust of the monotonous experience that had followed his first years of illusion. And now the perspective in the bed of the fountain took on a form of heart-breaking sadness. It was made up of a gloomy and isolated house in a nook of the woods, a solitary and monotonous close of life, with a fantastic dog and musty books for companions.

He was in the midst of this sorrowful and misanthropic meditation when the dog commenced a



furious barking, and suddenly bounded under the trees, twisting herself in such a marvelous fashion that her head and tail almost joined.

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed a voice, whose drawling intonations betrayed the Langrois accent; "you are a good dog, and you have more wit than many human beings I know. Ah! M. Noël, are you asleep, or do you fail to recognize your old friends?"

The old man started, and, raising his head, perceived the chief forester of Auberive, followed by his assistant. The forester, tall and thin, with mustache and hair cut like a brush, a face browned by exposure to the weather, and a deep scar on his left cheek, had under his faded green uniform the stately bearing of an old soldier. The assistant, in a blouse, with his gun resting on his shoulder, kept at a respectful distance from his superior.

"I beg your pardon, Verdier," said M. Noël. "I was dozing, and I had a disagreeable dream."

"Very well! I will tell you some good news to waken you. We have had a long letter from your former pupil."

The professor's face brightened.

"How is Antoine?" he asked with great interest.

"Our Antoine has done wonders!" replied the forester, in a tone full of proud satisfaction. "Go with me to the Belle Étoile, where I must



mark the wood blown down by the last storm, and I will tell you everything as we go along."

The old man silently took up his basket and followed the forester.

"I told you," he continued, "that Antoine had sent us good tidings. He has passed his examination for a fellowship, and has been appointed—guess what!—Professor of Botany at the Museum."

"You see I was right in rousing his interest in scientific studies," said M. Noël.

"Perhaps so ; but, as we are not rich, I was obliged to consider the matter on all sides. A scientific profession is very desirable, but it is also very uncertain ; while, once admitted to the school of forestry, Antoine was sure of earning his living."

"Yes, his bare living ; perhaps eighteen hundred francs a year."

"I know that very well ; but his mother, Sœurette, is not ambitious, and she has a great dread of Paris. 'I shall never see him again !' she moaned from morning till evening. Even now she wakens me on winter nights with a start. 'Ah !' she sighs, 'how it snows ! And to think that the dear child perhaps this very hour is wandering about the streets of Paris !' She sees him crushed by a carriage, murdered in a corner of the street, or something else equally frightful ! It is a terrible thing to be the mother of an only son,



for there is no end to the foolish fears that find a lodging-place in her brain."

"If you pay attention to a woman's sentimentality, you will never see the end of it," growled M. Noël.

"Indeed! I do nothing but laugh at it. Besides, Sœurette is convinced that you were right. She is proud enough of her son, I can tell you, and tells over her beads many times in gratitude for your devotion to him!"

"Do not speak of it!" muttered the good man.

"What then do you want us to speak of? Did you not give him your time and even your money? The truth is, Sœurette and I can never find words for all the gratitude we owe you."

M. Noël kicked out his foot emphatically.

"You owe me nothing!" he exclaimed in an angry voice. "What I did, I did for my own satisfaction! I took as much pleasure in seeing the development of your son's fine faculties as you do in the growth of a beautiful tree. I took care of him, and surrounded him with a rich soil. It warmed my blood and made my days shorter and less tedious. It was selfishness, that was all! you owe me nothing, understand me—nothing! Don't mention it again."

"I will not mention it if it vexes you," replied the forester, amazed at the old man's ill-humor. "I will content myself with thinking of it. But hush! listen!"



A sound came from the depths of the neighboring valley, something like the crash of a breaking branch. The foresters exchanged glances of intelligence.

"Some one is there," growled M. Verdier, "who does not wait for the wind to blow down the branches."

"The noise comes from Spring Valley," said the assistant.

"We must go and see," replied Verdier, biting his mustache. "We will make our way to the valley, and try to catch the thief in the act. Take care of Vagabonde, M. Noël, and keep her from making a noise."

The old man tied his handkerchief to the dog's collar for a string, and, having previously administered to her an injunction to hold her tongue, followed the foresters in their rapid progress toward the bottom of the valley. The sound of their steps was deadened by the moss covering the path, so that the wood-cutter, absorbed in his work, did not hear them coming. The three men rushed upon him just as he had finished breaking the highest branch of a maple-tree. Vagabonde, escaping from M. Noël's leading-string, sprang forth with such frantic barking that the trespasser let his hatchet fall, astounded at the sudden outburst.

This trespasser was a poor little fellow, thirteen years old, lean and spry as a monkey, with matted hair hanging over a face whose features



bore an expression of artfulness and low cunning. Frightened by the menacing appearance of the foresters, he stood with his lips wide apart, and with his great round eyes staring like those of a cat caught in the very act.

"Rogue !" cried the forester.

"Where did you come from, you scoundrel ?" rudely asked the assistant, who had taken possession of the hatchet. "You must tell us your name, and besides we shall confiscate your hatchet."

At the thought of this confiscation, which disturbed him more than anything else, the *gamin* burst out into noisy demonstrations of despair.

"Pardon me, M. Verdier !" he howled in the midst of his sobs ; "I will never do so again ! Give me back my hatchet ; if I go home without it I shall get a sound beating !"

"That is no more than you deserve, you wicked boy. Where do you live ?"

The boy paid no attention to this question. Instead of replying, he twisted his hands desperately in his tattered blouse and filled the valley with his lamentations.

"My hatchet !" he cried ; "pardon ! my hatchet !"

A sound of branches being trampled upon and the trot of a horse on the path leading from the Vivey road suddenly attracted the attention of the three men. A young lady appeared abruptly



between the shoots of two hazel-nut trees. She was mounted on a small Breton horse ; and, urging him forward at a vigorous pace, he came bounding through the branches with the same impetuosity with which he would have galloped over the soil of his native land.

M. Noël and the foresters, surprised at this unexpected intrusion, turned toward the unknown visitor, whose youthful and imperious beauty made a vivid impression upon their minds. She had red hair, and her luxuriant tresses, half-unbound by the caressing branches, had fallen beneath her Hungarian cap upon her riding-dress, and hung in wavy ringlets mingled with blue ribbons. Her face, of a rosy paleness, was lighted by large fawn-like eyes glittering under long lashes. Brandishing a whip in her ungloved hand, her nostrils quivering, and her mouth full of disdain, she took advantage of the surprise of the foresters to urge her horse between them and the offender.

“You are a set of cowards !” she exclaimed, in a sarcastic and indignant tone—“all three of you to pounce upon this poor child and make him cry !”

M. Verdier, being the first to recover his self-possession, bowed gravely to the girl.

“You are a little too prompt in your judgment, mademoiselle,” he replied. “This young rogue was making fagots of the best wood in the copse.”



"Where is the harm?" said the girl. "Does not the forest belong to every one?"

"By no means. The forest belongs to the State, and any one who cuts wood in the forest robs the State."

"The State will not be ruined because this child has broken off three or four useless branches. Go away, little fellow, and leave them to talk as much as they please."

The *gamin* threw a shy glance toward his protectress, and sobbed in a pitiful tone :

"They will not give me back my hatchet!"

"How!" she said, drawing a piece of money quickly from her portemonnaie, "take this, and go off as fast as possible."

He did not wait for her to repeat the order, but seized the money in the twinkling of an eye, put it into his mouth, and darted into the thicket, where he disappeared.

M. Noël watched the girl with an increasing curiosity. The forester bit his lips.

"You set a very bad example," he said, in an angry tone. "I do not understand how a young lady who has been well brought up can encourage vagabonds to break the laws in this way."

"Pretty things your laws are!" she replied, tossing back her flowing hair.

Then, as the under-forester pretended to go after the delinquent, she spurred her horse, already impatient and plunging about in all direc-



tions, directly across the path. The dog, exasperated by these manœuvres, commenced barking again; the horse pranced round, sniffing the air with a great noise.

"You had better take care of your dog!" cried the angry girl to the assistant, who extended his hand to seize the bridle.

At the same time, endeavoring to strike the dog with her whip, the blow fell unintentionally upon the assistant's fingers. Vagabonde, scarcely touched, rolled over on M. Noël's basket; the mushrooms were scattered among the briars, while the malicious beast howled as if she had been beaten to death. The road was now free, the horse started off at a quick pace, and the Amazon disappeared behind the young trees of the valley.

"That is a true saying: 'Bad as a red-haired girl!' Do you know who she is, Saudax?" said the forester to his assistant.

"It must be the young lady who lives at the Maison Verte," he replied, while blowing his hand bruised by the whip-lash.

"Does any one live at the Maison Verte?"

"Yes, M. Verdier. An iron manufacturer's son, of Franche-Comté, bought the place this winter; a M. La Tremblaie, and he has lived there four months with his wife and daughter. The young woman is a devil unchained, and we have just had a specimen of her character."



“La Tremblaie,” repeated M. Noël, starting ;  
“did you say La Tremblaie, Saudax ?”

The under-forester nodded assent.

“Do you know him ?” he asked.

The old man shook his head. “No,” he replied, curtly ; “I do not know him, and I do not care to know him.”

M. Noël picked up the remains of his mushrooms, whistled to his dog, and said : “Come, it is time to return to Le Chânois. We have made a bad beginning for the day. Good-morning, messieurs !”

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## II.

AFTER leaving the Spring Valley, the Amazon quickly reached the main road. As her route led up-hill, and passed along the border of a wood, she walked her horse, and allowed him to take breath until she reached the culminating point, whence a delightful view of Vivey could be obtained.

The village, overlooked on three sides by perpendicular rocks and wooded escarpments, reposes in the centre of a well of verdure. The lowest beeches of the forest almost touch the flat stone roofing of the low houses closely collected around a stream issuing from the rock. A narrow neck of meadow land separates the dwelling-



houses of the opposite declivity, where the trees begin again to take on a fleecy form. At a short distance from the village the meadow land grows a little broader, the stream describes a small arc of a circle among the alders, and, in the green peninsula formed by the capricious water, an ancient seigniorial manor arises, whose modest main building with its slate roof is flanked by two turrets capped like extinguishers. An avenue of lindens connects it with the village. The walls of the habitation are almost entirely concealed under ivy and other climbing vines. It is doubtless to this covering of verdure that it owes the name of *Maison Verte*, by which it is known throughout the country.

This abode and its surroundings, as well as the smallest nooks of the village, were distinctly visible from the girl's point of view. She stopped her horse abruptly, and her attention was quickly directed to a cabriolet with a dusty capote, drawn by a piebald horse, stationed at the *Maison Verte*.

The owner of the equipage stood in the gateway, making his last bow to a lady at one of the lower windows of the house. He was a huge fellow, long-limbed, formed like a Hercules, and dressed like a rustic hunter. After a final salutation, he seated himself under the capote of the cabriolet and took the reins ; but the horse, at the first stroke of the whip, instead of starting,



propped himself on his forelegs, backed, kicked, and finally lay down on his side in the middle of the road. The giant jumped from the cabriolet, fumbled in his vest-pocket, and, without manifesting the slightest impatience, as if such an occurrence were an ordinary affair, planted himself in front of the beast, and showed him at a convenient distance something that appeared to be a lump of sugar. The amiable animal stretched out his neck, got up, and decided to follow the bait with which his master enticed him, running at the same time with short steps in advance of the carriage.

This great fellow ambling along, with his hands behind his back, and turning his head every now and then to encourage his spoiled pet, this lean hack with his parti-colored skin, and this old cabriolet tacking about over the pebble-stones, formed such a grotesque picture that the girl, looking upon it from her high observatory, was convulsed with laughter. After a few minutes of this exercise, the giant, judging that his horse was sufficiently tractable, slipped away by a brusque side movement, leaped with great rapidity into the cabriolet, seized the reins, and drove off on a trot.

The girl followed the retreating carriage with a derisive expression on her lips ; then, humming irreverently the air of " A pleasant journey, Monsieur Dumollet," she touched lightly with her



whip the little Breton horse, and quickly descended the hill toward Vivey.

The lady to whom the owner of the cabriolet had made his parting bow had remained at the window. When the carriage disappeared, she turned toward the interior of the apartment, where a man about fifty years old, buried in an easy-chair, was reading a newspaper.

"Well ! Clotilde," he asked, "has M. de Préfontaine succeeded in starting his piebald horse ?"

"Yes," she replied, "but he went through with the usual scene of the lump of sugar."

She took a seat in front of the reader. The two persons facing each other formed a curious contrast. The woman, tall, elegant, with a finely developed physique, had the warm and rich complexion belonging to brunettes. She had passed her fortieth year, but, if her color had lost its freshness, her beauty, slightly masculine, still preserved its brilliancy. Her low and smooth forehead and her fleshy and heavy chin gave evidence of an obstinate and tyrannical nature, more emphatic than tender ; but her moist and smiling lips and her black eyes sparkling under long lashes had an expression that was both alluring and absorbing.

The man was of medium stature, blonde, lymphatic, with distinguished features, but sadly wanting in energy. His intelligent but bashful eyes and his undecided movements betrayed that



soft, dreamy indolence characteristic of certain blonde temperaments. His neck, sometimes inclined forward, sometimes idly bent over one shoulder, the vagueness of his glances, and the slow utterance of his words, gave still more emphatic evidence of the same elements of character. A physiologist would have certainly discovered in this languishing attitude the first symptoms of a weakening of the nerves.

This woman, with her rich and abundant blood and her elastic and resistant nerves, seemed to have absorbed the man's whole vital force, and made him revolve, as it were, with the circle of her black eyeballs. He yielded at last through the pages of his newspaper to her despotic sway, for he suddenly folded it up and said, with a smile: "This Préfontaine is a worthy man, but he is a little heavy, and not very brilliant in conversation."

"Such as he is," the lady replied, shrugging her shoulders, "we must be contented with him, since he is the only one among our neighbors who has deigned to return our visits."

M. La Tremblaie suppressed a sigh.

"Between ourselves," he replied, "I fear he comes here much less on account of us than of Raymonde's beautiful eyes."

"Where is the harm?" replied Mme. Clotilde La Tremblaie, in an insinuating voice. "M. de Préfontaine is not to be despised. He bears an



honorable name, and, if he has no fortune, at least he holds a desirable position in the canton. It is for your interest to choose a son-in-law who will help you to better social relations in the country."

"But Raymonde?"

"She will not be an object of pity if she wins a husband who adores her."

"Do you think she has a fancy for M. de Préfontaine?"

"I think she has a fancy for being married! In spite of her thoughtlessness, she already begins to understand many things, and feels that in the matter of husbands she has not the embarrassment of a large choice."

M. La Tremblaie sighed again, and a moment of silence ensued between the two speakers, which was interrupted by the trot of a horse under the lindens.

"There she is!" said Mme. Clotilde, going to the window.

A few minutes after the door was suddenly thrown open, and the young heroine of the Spring Valley, with her hair still in disorder from her ride, entered the room, rushed to her father, and kissed him.

"Have you had a pleasant ride?" asked M. La Tremblaie, his dreamy face lighted up by a smile.

"Excellent! I had a Quixotic adventure that I must tell you about."



"While you were running round the country," Mme. Clotilde remarked, "you lost a visit from M. de Préfontaine."

"I know it," replied Raymonde, with a wry face. "I watched at a distance the scene with the lump of sugar, and laughed at it heartily."

"He regretted his misfortune in not meeting you."

"He was wrong; I was in a teasing mood, and he would have been my victim."

"He will, however, come again to-morrow," continued Mme. La Tremblaie; "he is going to dine with us, and I hope you will behave less like a *gamin* than usual."

Raymonde turned abruptly toward her mother with a defiant, almost aggressive expression on her countenance.

"I have no talent for saying what I do not think," she replied, sharply. "When I see M. Osmin de Préfontaine, droll thoughts come into my head. How do you wish me to treat him?"

"I wish, mademoiselle," exclaimed Mme. Clotilde, passionately, "that you should pay more respect to a man who deserves to be treated seriously! I leave you with your father, who will tell you the rest."

She left the room with a stately step, while Raymonde followed her retreating form with wondering eyes.

"What does it all mean?" said the girl, in a



low tone, at the same time throwing herself on her father's knees and putting her arms round his neck.

"Your mother is right," replied M. La Tremblaie, in an embarrassed manner. "M. de Préfontaine is a worthy man, whom you must treat with more respect."

He reflected a moment, while the girl kept her place on his knee, then continued :

"Raymonde, do you remember your last year at the boarding-school?"

"Yes, indeed!" she answered; "it makes me yawn even to think of it."

"Do you remember one day when I was in the parlor while you were practising on the piano? Your back was turned to me, and you did not know I was there. Instead of playing, you had rested your hands languidly on the key-board (I see it now), and you sighed in a lamentable tone, 'Oh for a little husband! a dear little husband!'"

"I believe you, for my life was wearisome beyond endurance."

"And is it still wearisome?"

"Not when I am with you!" she said, kissing him once more; "but sometimes, when I have been alone too long, I get tired of everything."

"If, then, a husband should be offered you, either little or big?"



She loosened her arms hastily from his neck, and jumped to the floor at a bound.

"You want me to marry M. de Préfontaine?" she cried, looking earnestly at her father, and menacing him with her finger.

"That is true!" replied M. La Tremblaie, blushing; "your mother and I have just been talking about it. To speak frankly, this would be a good match, provided it pleases you, my darling!"

She shrugged her shoulders like a dissatisfied child, turned her back to her father, seated herself in front of the window, and began to drum upon it with her fingers.

"Préfontaine," M. La Tremblaie timidly resumed, "is not an effeminate beauty, but he is healthy and well formed."

"I should think so!" interrupted Raymonde, drumming furiously; "six feet—a giant!"

"He has an honorable name; his ancestors—"

"Went to the crusades. I know that by heart!"

"He did his duty bravely during the war; he has a loyal character, a heart like gold, and he loves you—"

"Foolishly, that is true; but if I were to marry him, I should always see him running with a lump of sugar in front of his piebald horse."

"It is time to put an end to such child's-play," said M. La Tremblaie, impatiently; "one would



think that even in this desert country you had all the husbands in the world to choose from !”

“ But husbands grow in other countries, I suppose !”

“ We are fixed here. And then,” pursued Raymonde’s father, sadly, “ there are other and graver reasons that must necessarily limit your choice.”

She turned abruptly toward him.

“ What are they ?” she said.

“ You will know them one of these days.”

“ Very well ! then, why not wait ?”

“ Because, ungrateful child, I would not like to leave you alone with your mother, and I may die.”

“ Oh !” She looked with a terrified glance upon her father’s pale and sickly face, and a moment of profound silence ensued. The rhythmical sound of the scythes in the meadow, the distant barking of the village dogs, and the dull buzzing of the bees among the lindens of the avenue, came in confused murmurs through the open window.

Raymonde returned gently toward M. La Tremblaie, and kneeling at his side, her head raised toward his, and her eyes looking straight into his — “ My dear father,” she murmured, “ would this marriage be a very, very great pleasure to you ?”

“ It would make me easy in regard to your future, and at the same time give us a firm posi-



tion in this country, where we are regarded a little too much as birds of passage. It would be a good thing for us all."

"Well ! for you—anything for you, you understand ! I promise to try my best to get used to this idea ; but you must not urge me too much, you know ! My mother and *him* together—you must give me time to become accustomed to it by degrees."

"Dear child !" he said, pressing her hands in his—"poor child !"

Raymonde felt her forehead moistened by a tear ; she threw herself on her father's neck, kissed him with a passionate abruptness, and went out without saying a word.

She rushed to her own room with its peaceful outlook upon the woods, sat down in the embrasure of the window, and plunged her burning face among the ivy leaves hanging from the wall.

Marriage ! she had often dreamed of it during the last two years, in Paris or in the country, within the four walls of boarding-schools to which she had been consigned by the nomadic and peculiar life of her parents ; but the ideal husband whose shadowy image flitted between her eyes and the pages of her book bore little resemblance to the colossal Osmin de Préfontaine. He was a hero of romance endowed with every fascination, adorned with every elegant accomplishment—"charming, young, drawing all hearts after him."



Since the family had lived in Vivey she had been free to gallop through the woods, and the phantom of an ideal lover had again haunted her imagination during her wild excursions within the depths of the forest. She looked for him in the deep ravines, among the murmuring voices of the springs, and she imagined he might suddenly appear at some winding of the path, like the king's son in the fairy tale.

Now she must bid farewell to these dreams, renounce her wild rides through this land of enchantment, and walk prosaically by the side of the real *fiancé* that chance offered her. He was indeed a lover of flesh and bone, without a single spiritual grace. And what abounding flesh, what a massive structure of bones ! A robust country gentleman, hunting six months of the year, and passing the other six months in fishing or playing games !

Raymonde quitted the window-seat, and with a spring placed herself in front of a large mirror framed in baguettes with tarnished gilding. The mirror was surmounted by a panel on which was painted a shepherd in a jacket gaily decorated with ribbons, playing on a pipe at the feet of a shepherdess in a hoop-petticoat, who listened to him with a languishing air. Raymonde saw the reflection of the upper part of her body in the sombre depths of the glass. The slender figure gracefully moulded by the corsage of her riding-



habit, the white and flexible neck, the elegant oval of her face, the child's mouth with bright red lips, the brown eyes starred with points of gold, and the silken luxuriance of her abundant hair with its warm tints, were faithfully reproduced.

She had no false modesty, she knew she was beautiful. To think that this triumphant beauty must be forever shut up in the doleful pigeon-house of Lamargelle, which M. de Préfontaine dignified with the name of château !

She raised her eyes to the shepherdess in the painting with an expression full of despair. This shepherd, playing eternally the same love-song, seemed to cast ironical glances at the young girl ; this shepherdess, gaudily adorned, regarded her with an air of pitiful compassion. She stamped her foot with spiteful emphasis, and returned to her seat in the window, restless, fierce, undecided, biting the ivy-leaves snatched from the trellis, and revolving in her mind what course she could take the next day to discourage M. de Préfontaine.

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### III.

“CERTAINLY, madame, Pigeau is not a perfect beast, and is loath to make the first pull ; but, once started, it is almost impossible to stop him.



Ha ! ha ! He resembles his master, and this is why Pigeau and I love each other, in spite of our faults."

M. Osmin de Préfontaine, delighted at having given utterance to this sally of wit, burst into a loud laugh that seemed to fill the drawing-room, where he was talking with M. and Mme. La Tremblaie while waiting for dinner to be served. Osmin was a person of huge dimensions, with limbs corresponding in size. He had a stentorian voice, hair set close on his bull-shaped forehead, and a beard in the form of a fan. Although he was twenty-five years old, his fresh complexion, large, humid eyes, and excessive awkwardness gave him the ingenuous appearance of a youth who had grown beyond measure during his last year at college. Confidence and kindness of heart were, however, plainly written on his countenance, which had never blushed for an unworthy deed. There was in the whole bearing of this giant something that recalled the heavy and indulgent good-nature of the great dogs of the Pyrenees, so terrible in aspect and so gentle in character. His hands and feet were constantly in the way. He did not know what to do with them, and every effort he made to conceal only served to draw attention to these untoward extremities. Happening to look at his boots, adorned for the occasion with piqué gaiters of a dazzling whiteness, he hastened to thrust them under the seat of the chair ; then, ill



at ease, in a few moments he delivered them from imprisonment, and modestly crossed them one over the other. He repeated this operation indefinitely, varying it occasionally by casting stealthy glances toward the door, through which he hoped to see Raymonde enter.

She made her appearance at last, half smiling and half serious, her figure displayed to advantage in a dress of soft material, and her head surrounded like an aureole with her red hair lightly crisped. Dinner was served; Préfontaine took in Mme. Clotilde, and they passed into the dining-room, where through the open windows came the delicious perfume of the honeysuckle, mingled with the more penetrating fragrance of new-mown hay.

Much to Mme. La Tremblaie's surprise, Raymonde refrained from her usual exhibition of childish folly. Reserved, almost silent, she held back on her lips the witty retorts provoked on ordinary occasions by Osmin's simple remarks. This self-imposed restraint gave a mysterious and piquant expression to her face, which was a new charm for M. Préfontaine. Two or three times his eyes sought hers without encountering the glance of derision he had learned to dread. She listened to a long story of the chase without interrupting him once; and at dessert, when Osmin went into ecstasies over the beauty of a basket of flowers placed in the centre of the table, she carried her amiable mood so far as to select a



rose-bud and arrange it on his coat as a *boutonnière*.

Mme. Clotilde could hardly believe her eyes ; M. La Tremblaie smiled quietly ; and Préfontaine, in his enchantment, drank two glasses of old Burgundy, one after the other, which produced a mild form of intoxication.

After coffee, Raymonde and her mother, leaving the two men to smoke their cigars, returned to the drawing-room ; and in a few minutes the notes of the piano gently touched by the girl's finger's reached Osmin's ears. He had succeeded at last in getting his limbs into a comfortable position, and was racking his brain to keep up a conversation that M. La Tremblaie allowed to drop every moment. Préfontaine found this evening a charming melody in the sound of the piano, and manifested his joy by beating the measure entirely out of time. If he had been more familiar with the music of the day, the air chosen by Raymonde must have aroused strong doubts of the eventual success of his suit. She played a selection from one of the fashionable operas, and if Osmin had understood the words he would have been greatly surprised. It was the air from "*La Grande Duchesse*."

Dites-lui qu'on l'a remarqué,

Distingué ;

Dites-lui qu'on le trouve aimable. . . .



“What beautiful music !” murmured Préfontaine, bobbing his head up and down. “I am not a good judge, but I never heard anything I liked so well.”

M. La Tremblaie, who knew the opera, and suspected some mischievous device on the part of Raymonde, frowned at first ; but, seeing the expression of simple amazement on his companion’s face, he smiled inwardly at his stupidity and bowed in token of assent.

One by one the mocking and cajoling notes came floating through the air, until Osmin de Préfontaine was beside himself :

Dites-lui que, s’il le voulait,

On ne sait

De quoi l’on serait capable.

Osmin left his seat, threw away his cigar, and ventured to take a few steps toward the drawing-room. At last, unable to restrain himself any longer, he looked at M. La Tremblaie with an eye so full of entreaty that his host pitied his impatience.

“My dear friend,” he said, “do not trouble yourself to wait for me. I like music better at a distance. Go, I will not detain you any longer.”

Préfontaine opened the door before he had finished what he was saying. He went rapidly toward the drawing-room, which was separated from the dining-room by the library ; but a man



six feet high and stout in proportion cannot walk with a light step, especially if he wears heavy boots made by a Lamargelle shoemaker.

Raymonde recognized at a distance this resounding step on the inlaid floor ; she had a presentiment of a long and disagreeable *tête-à-tête*, carried on between her and her colossal lover. Her fingers came to a sudden stop on the keyboard, and, without paying the slightest attention to her mother's effort to retain her, she escaped into the garden, which communicated with the drawing-room.

When Osmin bashfully entered the room, the chords of the open piano still vibrated, but the musician had fled ; no one was there but Mme. Clotilde, stretched out in an arm-chair, turning over the leaves of a journal of fashion. Préfontaine's face lengthened, and took on such a ludicrous expression of disappointment that his hostess could not repress a smile.

"So I am not the one you wish to see ?" she exclaimed. Then, making a sign for him to take a seat near her, she went on :

"Own that you love her dearly !"

"Yes, indeed !" he replied with a sigh : "I love her, although I know full well there is nothing desirable about me. I am poor, I cannot talk, and I have a ridiculous figure."

"You are too modest, dear neighbor," interrupted Mme. La Tremblaie ; "with your name and



position, you should aspire to the most eligible match in the country. Shall I talk with you frankly? Well, then, if you love Raymonde, dare to tell her so; plead your own cause, and you will succeed. Only—”

“Only what?” he repeated in an anxious voice.

“Who can tell? Before the matter comes to a conclusion, the obstacles will perhaps come from your side and not from ours.”

“What obstacles?” exclaimed Osmin. “Ah! dear lady, you cannot tell how much I love her. I should be ready to root up the whole forest of Vivey if it rose in my path to prevent me from marrying Mlle. Raymonde.”

“You will not need to root up a forest,” she replied, with an insinuating smile; “but you will have to take a leap over certain prejudices of family and birth, to which in your world an exaggerated importance is usually attached, and this will probably be more difficult than you imagine.”

“What do I care for that?” he said, with a loud burst of laughter. “Oh! oh! I am not so spoiled by my good blood as to think it a degradation to marry a girl without a particle. Besides, all the relation I have in the world is an old uncle, very indulgent in this respect, for he married his servant.”

This answer appeared to put Mme. La Trem-



blaie much more at her ease. A smile of satisfaction passed over her face, and she resumed :

“In that case, my dear friend, allow me to repeat that you are too reserved with Raymonde. Women like audacity. Have you spoken to her of your love?”

“Not yet !” he cried. “I should not presume without your permission.”

“Very well ! I give you full permission. Declare yourself this evening, and bring matters to a crisis quickly ; you will have no cause to repent of it.”

“But,” murmured Osmin, frightened and a little shocked, “will not Mlle. Raymonde consider such proceedings too abrupt ? I should prefer to have her better prepared to listen to me, and I am afraid she will not receive me favorably.”

Mme. Clotilde saw that he was disturbed and perplexed, and, with the boldness that formed the key-note of her character, resolved to strike a final blow—destined to put an end to the hesitation of the honest fellow whom she wished to have for a son-in-law.

“What an indifferent lover you are !” she exclaimed, shrugging her shoulders. She went toward Osmin, who was walking up and down the room, within which the first shadows of twilight were creeping. “There !” she continued, taking his arm. “Raymonde is in the garden ; go and join her ; tell her what your heart dictates.”



She guided him to the flower-beds, where the petunias exhaled in the night their clove-like fragrance ; and, when Préfontaine turned to reply to her, she had already returned to the house.

The great fellow remained thoughtful for a moment, shook his shoulders, drew a long sigh from the depths of his breast, and passed quickly over the sombre greensward. He searched vainly in the paths leading under the clumps of mountain-ash and evergreens ; he visited the vegetable garden, the greenhouse, the orchard ; there was no one to be seen ! As he made his way over the walk by the river-side bordering on the wall of the inclosure, he saw that the small gate opening upon the woods was ajar. " Good ! " he thought ; " the witch has escaped into the fields." Pushing the gate half open, he entered a steep and narrow path that led up the hill among groves of aspen and beam trees.

He lighted a cigar, and walked slowly along, glad to find himself alone for a moment, and to be able to reflect at his ease on Mme. Clotilde's singular advice. The good Osmin was a dull-brained individual, and it took a long time to get an idea through his head. The advice he had received rather chilled than encouraged him, though his opinions were not old-fashioned nor his principles rigid. His education had been of the simplest kind. He had lost his mother when very young ; his father, a country gentleman, passed



his life in hunting or at play, and abandoned him to the care of servants till he was ten years old. A village curé, to whom his education was intrusted, found the greatest difficulty in rousing his dormant intellect. From the age of fifteen his manners and habits were modeled after those of the farmers and hunters with whom he associated.

He was not at all frightened at the idea of choosing a wife from a social position inferior to his own, and he would have married the daughter of a woodcutter or a coal-man without the least scruple, if he had taken a fancy to her : but he had a countryman's instinctive distrust, and he found something inexpressibly equivocal and disquieting in the haste with which Mme. Clotilde, as it were, threw her daughter at his head. His future mother-in-law was by no means to his taste.

For all that, when he thought of Raymonde, with her magnificent hair, her flexible form, and alluring arms, he felt himself moved from head to foot, his heart beat rapidly, and he was seized with a violent desire to possess this dazzlingly beautiful flower entirely to himself.

"After all," he thought, "I shall not marry the whole family ! When Raymonde is my wife, we shall live in our own home, and we shall see the La Tremblaies only on great festivals. Nonsense ! how ridiculously I talk ! It would seem, to hear me, that I had nothing to do but stretch



out my hand and lead Raymonde to my house. Think how elegant, attractive, and witty she is ! A true duchess ! What right have I to dream that she will look with favor upon such a clown as I am ! ”

He was in the midst of these reflections when he hit his foot against the stump of a half-uprooted tree, and, raising his head, perceived that he had reached a large pasture scattered over with clumps of junipers and surrounded by woods.

“ Deuce take it ! ” he murmured, “ here I am at the square field, and no appearance of Raymonde ! ”

The sky swarmed with stars, and the immovable borders of the forest threw out their sombre masses against the clearer horizon. On the left, toward the gorge of Vivey, the noise of a stream filled the air with its flute-like sounds, and its course was indicated by the washings of white linen spread out on the borders, and fluttering like gauze among the birch-trees with their quivering foliage.

Osmin’s eyes searched in vain the gray extent of waste land. Suddenly, however, he uttered an exclamation of surprise, and stopped short, while a slight shudder ran through his whole frame. Not far away, near the point where the white linen first touched the greensward, a red glimmer danced behind the junipers, and a slender human silhouette, rising in black from the red background,



tossed back and forth its head, crowned with small phosphorescent stars.

Osmin, superstitious as a German peasant, thought at first of the *Folletot*, the hobgoblin of the Langrois mountain, and could not repress an instinctive movement of terror. He was a brave man, however, and, quickly recovering his self-possession, advanced with a deliberate step toward the mysterious light. Before he had crossed the path, the barking of a dog relieved his fears of the presence of a supernatural visitor. At the same time, the strange silhouette crowned with stars approached him, and he recognized Raymonde. The coquette had managed to imprison a dozen glow-worms in her hair, which still continued to throw out their greenish light among the silky waves of her abundant locks.

"I will bet I frightened you," she called out, with a smile on her lips.

"Frightened? no," he replied, "but confused. You are beautiful as a fairy."

"Come," she continued, "I was just going to have my fortune told. Do you believe in fortune-tellers, M. de Préfontaine?"

She led him, more amazed than ever, to a herdsman's fire, near which a poor and haggard peasant was standing, wrapped in a goat-skin mantle. Osmin recognized the shepherd of Vivey.

"Ha! it is Trinquesse," said he, smiling in his turn. "Good evening, old man! Have not



the judges of Langres given you a distaste for the business of fortune-telling ? ”

The shepherd raised his broad-brimmed felt hat, and, imposing silence upon his dog :

“The judges cannot change the order of Nature, M. de Préfontaine,” he replied, while his wrinkled face was distorted by a smile, and his small, malignant eyes hurled glances of malicious hatred upon the young man. “They cannot prevent the lines from crossing in the hollow of the hand, nor the stars from coming into conjunction in the heavens. And, if there is a correspondence between the celestial signs and the signs in the hand, what can the judges do ? Answer me, you who are a gentleman and a man of science ! I tell you the signs are dumb or intelligible according as one has the gift to comprehend them, and he who possesses the gift knows many things that the judges will never know. Ha ! ha ! I have revealed to more persons than one the secret thoughts that they believed were locked up within the innermost recesses of their hearts ! ”

“The fact is,” added Raymonde, “Trinquesse has told me things that have upset me entirely. It is your turn now, M. de Préfontaine ; give him your hand.”

“Willingly,” he answered, kneeling down on the grass. “Here is my hand, and the piece of silver with it. Tell me if I shall have what I desire ? ”



The shepherd threw a handful of twigs upon the fire, which quickly brightened up, and, taking Osmin's great palm in his, studied it carefully by the light of the blaze. Raymonde sat down on a stone, resting her forehead upon her hands. Not a sound broke the stillness around them, save the murmur of the distant stream, and occasionally the tremulous voice of a sheep, which, awake in a neighboring fold, gave utterance to a plaintive bleat.

"Bless me!" began Trinquesse, "here is a ring-finger which will never wear a marriage-ring, and this cross on the Mount of Saturn announces vexations in love. You will never marry, M. de Préfontaine."

"What did you say?" growled Osmin, much displeased at such a commencement.

"There is no need of being angry," continued the shepherd; "you will be just as happy. Your line of life is well defined. Healthy and ruddy, you will live many years, in good-humor with every one around you, have a good table and a good fire—"

Raymonde burst out laughing.

"The pest!" said Osmin, mortified at the girl's ridicule and the inglorious horoscope cast by Trinquesse. "You know nothing about it, you old dog, and I am a fool for listening to your nonsense. It is late, Mlle. Raymonde; shall we leave the old man to take care of his sheep?"



Raymonde made a sign of acquiescence, and they took leave of Trinquesse. The girl, gracefully raising her long skirts that were dragging in the dew, walked with a light and springing step, wrapping tightly around her waist a small woolen shawl, and holding up her head scintillating with glow-worms. Osmin walked silently by her side, with a disconcerted air, chewing a sprig of sage plucked from the grass during the consultation with the shepherd. The fortune-teller's ill-omened prognostic had disturbed the studied arrangement of the proposal he intended to address to Raymonde, and he did not know how to begin. To complete his perplexity, the moon rose above the woods and poured a flood of light over the whole extent of the square field, where the chirping of the crickets seemed to Osmin like shrill bursts of laughter.

"This brilliant light will never do," he thought; "I will speak when we reach the shade of the trees."

As to Raymonde, reassured by her lover's reserve, she regained her usual assurance.

"You are silent," she said to Osmin; "on the contrary, the moon puts me into high spirits. My nurse's old songs all come back to me when I am in the fields at night, and I must sing."

Swayed by the impulse of the moment, she commenced a rustic ballad in rich and melodious tones, which slightly revived Préfontaine's cour-



age ; and finally all his hesitation disappeared as the exciting words filled the sonorous air. It was indeed the song of the siren, and Osmin would have followed to the end of the world the charmer whose sarcastic and enticing voice found expression in these four lines :

“L’amour, l’amour qu’on aime tant,  
Est comme une montagne haute ;  
On la monte tout en chantant,  
On pleure en descendant la côte.”

They also were descending the hill leading to the garden-gate. The end of the walk drew nearer at every step, and Osmin’s chance for making a declaration that evening diminished in the same proportion.

“Isn’t that a lovely song?” murmured the singer, raising toward her colossal companion her head with its disheveled tresses, where the glow-worms threw out only a faint lustre, but where in revenge two bewitching eyes sparkled in the moonlight.

Osmin could not resist that glance. He turned suddenly, and, leaning against a wild pear-tree that had thrust itself into the middle of the path, said, in a voice stifled by emotion :

“Raymonde, I love you very much ! and, in spite of all that old fool of a shepherd has said, I believe there is in me the stuff for making a good husband. Would it be very disagreeable to you to be called Mme. de Préfontaine ?”



She drew back, visibly disconcerted by the abrupt declaration, cast down her eyes, and peeped through their long lashes at the anxious visage of the huge fellow who barred the passage, and whose face was illuminated by a ray of moonlight ; then she bit her lips and tried to think of some way of escape. The thicket was, however, impenetrable on each side, and Osmin held possession of the whole width of the path. She must reply, and not one word could she utter.

“ You are silent,” he said ; “ has my brusqueness frightened you ? ”

“ A little,” she replied, trying to make a joke of it. “ It is the first time I have been honored with such a proposal, and I am struck dumb with astonishment.”

“ I went the wrong way to work. I ought to have told you at first that your mother knew my wishes and gave me permission to propose to you.”

As she remained silent, he went on :

“ I own that it was bold on my part. I am not a brilliant match for any one, and I have a very humble estimate of my personal advantages.”

This honest avowal merited at least a pleasant word. Raymonde felt it, and nothing came to her lips but a sulky pout, which nevertheless was very becoming. She twisted and untwisted the ends of her woollen shawl around her hands.



"I am awkward and disagreeable," said Osmin, disappointed that she made no reply.

"I do not say so!" she exclaimed at last after a great effort; "but—but I have never thought of marriage. It always seemed to me that there would be time enough to think of it when I was older."

"Fifty years old, for instance," he said, with a loud laugh.

"No, but in a couple of years at the earliest. After all, I am scarcely eighteen years old!"

"Do not be uneasy!" he murmured, in a melancholy tone. "I do not wish to hold the pistol to your head. I will give you time. Only assure me that you will try to accustom yourself to the idea of being my wife, however astonishing it may seem to you at first."

She looked at him again through her long eyelashes, and seeing him with his back still squarely braced against the tree, evidently resolved not to move an inch before receiving an answer, she uttered a sigh.

"Then if I consent to try," she said, in an insinuating tone, "you will give me time to reflect before making up my mind?"

"I promise you."

"And afterward," she went on, with a provoking smile, "if, after having tried my best, I cannot decide?"

Osmin hung down his head without replying.



"You would not fail," she exclaimed, "to proclaim it upon the house-tops, and to treat me as a heartless coquette !"

"No," he said, raising his head bravely ; "I should curse my bad luck and go far away, loving and esteeming you forever."

Osmin's eyes were full of tears. Raymonde seemed touched and impatient at the same time ; she struck the ground nervously with the heels of her boots.

"I tire you," said Préfontaine, pitifully ; "you would be glad to get rid of me ?"

"No ; only it is late, and they will be anxious about me at home."

"Pardon me for having chosen so unpropitious a time. But I suffered too much to be silent. Indeed, I have really grown thin !"

She smiled, and glanced at the giant's broad shoulders with a malicious expression that seemed to say, "There is no appearance of it !"

"I had not the courage to wait till to-morrow," he continued ; "I wished to know my sentence this evening. But, after all, I do not know it ; I cannot tell yet whether you love me a little or whether you hate me."

"I certainly do not hate you," she replied, without much enthusiasm. Her embarrassment redoubled. Osmin took a step forward and seized the girl's fingers in his strong hand.

"Tell me—yes or no," he whispered.



Feeling her fingers imprisoned in the grasp of the sentimental Préfontaine, she looked around hopelessly to the right and left. Uncertain of what might come next, angry and excited, she muttered, hastily :

“ Well—yes, yes ! ”

Then, taking advantage of Osmin's movement toward her, and the small space left free between the tree and the copse, she glided from his fingers like a lizard, quickly descended to the bottom of the hill, and seized in great haste the handle of the little gate. Sure of a safe retreat, she felt some remorse for her cruelty, and, before disappearing, she cried, in thrilling tones, “ I will try. Farewell until to-morrow.”

And the gate was closed.

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#### IV.

“ BETTER,” says the Book of Proverbs, “ is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith.”

Osmin did not agree with King Solomon ; for, although Raymonde gave little encouragement to his advances, he looked upon her evasive answers as a positive engagement. Sure of the support of Mme. Clotilde and M. La Tremblaie, he regarded himself as an accepted lover, and paid his



court accordingly. Raymonde, partly from obedience and partly from want of occupation, received his homage in a passive way that did not amount to actual discouragement.

A girl, living in an out-of-the-way village, where admirers do not grow precisely like mushrooms, always finds a secret pleasure in feeling herself admired, even by a man with whom she is not in love. At eighteen she falls in love with love, for want of a lover, and deceives her heart as she deceives her hunger, by false pretenses. Raymonde amused herself by inhaling the agreeable fragrance emanating from a sincerely-devoted heart. If the vase was rough and unornamented, the perfume was none the less acceptable, and her delicate rose-colored nostrils did not disdain to breathe it occasionally. She received Osmin's tender attentions with the benevolent air of a queen who believes herself entitled to universal homage, without suspecting that her smiles were considered by Préfontaine as so many promises to pay which he would not fail to present at maturity. But coquettes, like money-borrowers, think that pay-day will never come. She had a long time before her ; he had promised not to hurry her ; and the marriage-day was so hidden in the distance by a misty haze that she lost sight of it every moment.

Osmin, on the contrary, looked upon this happy epoch as a smiling white statue firmly



located in an avenue of evergreens, in which it advanced a step every day. He laid his plans in conformity with this idea, and had already installed workmen at Lamargelle, so that the dull old dwelling might take on a more cheerful aspect, and Raymonde find a fitting nest when she decided to dwell there.

"Everything will soon be ready and arranged to suit her," he said one evening to Mme. Clotilde. "I must now go through with an indispensable formality, or rather a disagreeable duty, since it will oblige me to be absent for some weeks. I have spoken to you of an old uncle who lives in the Morvan, about forty miles away ; I am his godson and his sole heir. He has, however, married his housekeeper, a crafty peasant woman, who would like to get possession of his whole property if I did not put a stop to it. Therefore, every year, I go and pass six weeks with the old man, at the commencement of the hunting season. He is fifty years old ; and, if I do not consult him about my marriage, very likely he will cut me off in his will without a franc. I am going to see him, and during my visit to ask his consent. On my return I hope we can fix upon the day for the wedding."

Raymonde heard of the projected journey without manifesting any emotion. The idea of living for a few weeks without Osmin always at her side was not very insupportable.



On the morning of the day before his departure she took her usual ride through the woods, returned in high spirits, breakfasted with a good appetite, and, to enjoy a siesta more at her ease, threw herself into a hammock swung between two vigorous plane-trees at the end of the garden.

As she swayed lightly back and forth in the hammock, she saw, a hundred steps away, the stream gliding like a snake among the osiers, and the village houses with columns of smoke rising in the same direction. The cocks answered each other with shrill voices from one end of the street to the other, and the flails in the barns threshed the sheaves of wheat with an alternate movement. Higher up, on the great plateau commanding Vivey, where the undulations of the forest ceased, the skylarks sang above the stubble-fields. The girl followed with her eye their comings and goings. They soared in a straight line into the blue ether, and were lost to sight still warbling their sweet notes, then dropped from the lofty heights at one stretch in the same way ; others succeeded them, while the aërial and lulling music never ceased. Raymonde, her eyelids half closed, and her thoughts half-way to the land of dreams, enjoyed with sensuous pleasure the delicious moment that precedes sleep, when the reality of objects is effaced, and the whole atmosphere is filled with music and perfume.

She heard the skylarks sing :



“Osmin is going away.”

The mill-dam replied:

“He is going to-morrow.”

And the noonday bells seemed to add:

“A pleasant journey!”

Then her eyes closed entirely ; everything faded from her sight ; she was fast asleep.

She dreamed of a pathway stretching out for a great distance through a forest of beeches and lindens. At the extreme end Osmin was riding away on his piebald horse. The animal and his rider formed already but a single point in the distance, and, without being concerned about them any longer, she amused herself with gathering a bouquet among the tall fox-gloves that seemed to stretch out their corollas like purple fingers. While she was making up her nosegay, a voice was singing in the midst of the forest, a masculine and caressing voice, strong and tender at the same time. She was under the charm ; the grass appeared more green, the perfume more penetrating, in proportion as this magic voice pervaded the air.

Suddenly, the gallop of the horse, again resounding, rapidly drew near, and Osmin's laugh—that enormous and deafening laugh—drowned the voice of the unknown, and broke the enchantment.



A shower of rose-leaves, falling on her face and neck, awoke her with a start, and her eyes were scarcely half opened when she perceived Osmin standing in front of her, convulsed with laughter.

"I do not like your joking!" she exclaimed, while rubbing her heavy eyelids with the spiteful and yet graceful gesture of a child rudely awakened from its first sleep. "How long have you been here?"

"About a quarter of an hour," he replied.

"And you did not waken me?" she continued, in an angry tone.

She perceived that her dress, raised by the motion of the hammock, disclosed her ankles, encased in blue and white striped silk stockings. Her anger redoubled, and, drawing her little feet hastily under her skirt, she said:

"It is treason to look at any one who is asleep; it is as bad as listening at the keyhole. Why did you not waken me immediately?"

"I had not the heart to disturb you. You looked too beautiful in your sleep, and I was too happy in being able to admire you at my ease. Besides, you seemed to be having a charming dream."

"No," she interrupted, "I was dreaming of you."

"Indeed!" cried Osmin, too much enchanted with the answer to see how impertinent it was.



He brought a rustic seat, and sat down near the hammock in such a way that his head was on a level with Raymonde's.

"I have just come from Langres," he added, "and I could not pass by your door without coming in. Remember that I am going away to-morrow, Mlle. Raymonde. How slowly the weeks will drag along while I stay with my tedious godfather!"

"Was it he," she asked, ironically, "who gave you the name of Osmin?"

"No," he replied, "that name has been in the family since the third crusade. My ancestor, Huon de Préfontaine, being the prisoner of a Musulman named Osmin, gained the affections of the infidel's daughter by his bravery. She offered to assist him in making his escape, upon condition that he would take her with him. My ancestor was as pious as he was brave; he refused flatly, as you may well suppose; and the father, who found it out, was so much pleased that he released him, without ransom, on condition that the baron of Préfontaine, and all his heirs forever, should give to their oldest sons the name of this blackamoor."

"Then, if you have a son, his name will be Osmin?" she said.

"His name will be whatever you please," he immediately replied, his face brightening at the thought.



She turned her head away scornfully, and a light blush suffused her cheek.

"Mlle. Raymonde," continued the giant, placing his heavy hand on the edge of the hammock, which began to oscillate like a pendulum, "will you think of me a little when I am gone?" She made no reply. "Promise at least not to think of any one else."

The girl's face appeared again through the meshes of the hammock, and she looked at Osmin with eyes sparkling with mischief.

"How can I tell?" she replied. "Perhaps I shall try to captivate the guardsman or the schoolmaster! This country offers so many resources!"

"That makes no difference. I shall not sleep in peace. You are so captivating, and I so rough and uninteresting. Also," he stammered, drawing a jewel-case of garnet velvet from his pocket, "I beg you as a favor to wear during my absence this bracelet, which I purchased for you at Langres."

She turned completely round, and looked with great curiosity upon the half-open jewel-case, which disclosed an enameled bracelet ornamented by a design with the words "Think of me" engraved in gold on the black enamel. The jewel had a clumsy look and was in doubtful taste.

"Where did you hunt that up?" she whispered.

"I hope it pleases you!" cried the worthy Os-



min ; “ permit me to put it on for you, and promise not to take it off.”

Raymonde held out her arm listlessly ; he clasped the bracelet ; then, bending over the plump white arm, he touched it respectfully with his lips.

“ Now,” he sighed, “ my mind will be more at ease when I return to Lamargelle. To-morrow my servant will drive me with Pigeau to Latrecey to take the train. We shall pass the Maison Verte at nine o’clock. Will you not go with me part of the way ? ”

She consented, and he went away in a mood alternating between happiness and melancholy.

The next day, when the modest equipage drawn by Pigeau turned the corner of the Vivey mill, Préfontaine saw the fluttering of a riding-skirt among the lindens of the Maison Verte, and heard the gallop of a horse. A half hour after, Raymonde and he were riding in company on the Auberive road. After passing through the town, they took the route that follows the course of the Aube, and sometimes overhangs the river perpendicularly. In this place the Aube, embanked between wooded hills, describes sudden circuits through a country full of rocks and indentations. At the base of one of these rocky hillocks an abandoned forge raises the blackened framework of its ruined buildings, and on the level surface at the top of the hill an old house, low, clumsy,



and flanked by a square, two-storied turret, profiles itself on the green background of the woods, in front of the road, from which it is separated only by the deep embankment of the river. When Raymonde and Osmin arrived in sight of this isolated dwelling, the girl looked at the forge in ruins and the turreted house, whose stern aspect made a blot upon the smiling harmony of the valley.

"What is that building?" she asked Préfontaine.

"That is Le Chânois," he answered. "The owner is an eccentric man, M. Noël, who lives there alone like an owl in the hollow of a dead tree."

"The nest suits the bird!" said Raymonde, scornfully.

They rode on to the point where the Latrecey road branches off into the valley of the Aube, and then the girl took leave of her lover with a slight shake of the hand.

She retraced her way at a rapid pace; but when opposite Le Chânois she stopped to examine the ungainly habitation that had made such an impression on her mind. At the same time, a yellow dog darted into the little garden in front of the house and saluted Raymonde with loud and angry barking.

"Ha, Vagabonde! what is the matter with you?" cried a scolding voice from the interior of



the dwelling. "Will you never learn to hold your tongue?"

And M. Noël, clothed in his greenish surtout, appeared upon the terrace. As soon as he cast his eyes upon the road, and saw the Amazon riding upon her wild-looking horse, he groaned in his turn.

"Ah! ah! you remembered her, did you? Feminine spite is more deeply rooted than nettles and thistles. Come into the house! Why do you snarl? The past is past, and the best way is to forget all about it!"

Vagabonde, her hair still bristling, sent forth a last sharp bark toward the road, and followed her master into the room on the ground-floor that served for both study and kitchen. This room, with an adjoining apartment transformed into a library, and a bed-room fitted up in the tower, composed the whole habitable part of Le Chânois; the rest was abandoned to the rats and bats. The small greenish panes of the single window, obstructed by books, admitted only a faint light upon the dilapidated pavement, the high blackened fireplace, the capacious kneading-trough, and the clock in its tall wooden case. From the joists blackened by smoke hung bunches of onions, yellow ears of corn, and long festoons of dried beans in their open pods. The sunshine, penetrating through the half-open door, threw into this light and shade a golden beam that reached the edge



of the table where M. Noël was getting ready to prepare his vegetables. The old man had no domestic. He took care of his own housekeeping, made his own bed, and would not allow a woman to put her foot into his chamber.

“These creatures,” he said, brutally, “bring into a house nothing but disturbance and evil-doing.”

An old farmer's wife living in the neighborhood was, however, allowed once a week to place upon the kneading-trough the bread and other provisions required. M. Noël took charge of the rest, and for a quarter of an hour he was now occupied in preparing his *pot-au-feu*. The pot, hanging from the hook, began to sing over the fire, and a tame raven watched the boiling of the water while hopping in front of the andirons, bobbing his head about in the most comical manner.

This raven was a constant source of trouble to Vagabonde. The dog and the bird lived on a footing of armed neutrality and mutual toleration, each trying to outwit the other by every possible device. Just now the raven had his eye upon a piece of dry bread that had fallen at M. Noël's feet, to which he was drawing near with stealthy steps; already he shook it in his beak with an evident foretaste of an appetizing meal, when the dog, which pretended to be asleep, sprang at a bound upon the crust, covered it with his fore paws, and then crouched down, replying with



low growls to the raven's desperate blows with his beak.

"Have done with this!" cried M. Noël, out of patience. "Snarling and jealous race, you have all the faults of your sex, and your malicious body is a lodging-place for the seven deadly sins. You detest dry bread—you will not eat it; but you do not care for that, provided you can do an injury to some one else, you bad dog."

He snatched the crust from his paws, and gave it to the raven, which took refuge on the kneading-trough. At this very moment the door was pushed open by a strong hand, and M. Verdier appeared upon the threshold, still bright with sunshine. The old forester entered with a radiant face, as if he had brought with him a portion of the brilliant sunlight that illuminated the outdoor atmosphere.

"Good morning, M. Noël," he exclaimed, shaking a letter above his head. "I have good news for you! Our Antoine is coming home."

The old man replied with a joyful exclamation.

"Good news are rare birds," he said, sententiously, "especially for me! But this makes me merry. I shall see him again, the big boy, already a man having others under his control! Do you know that it is seven years since I have set my eyes upon him?"

"Ah! yes. Seven years is a long lease for a



father who has but one son. We pined for him at home, and, when I announced the glad tidings to his mother, she fainted away for joy. Ever since last evening she is like a hen that has lost her chickens, going and coming from the cellar to the store-room, and turning the house upside down to get everything in order for her Antoine."

"The letter ! the letter !" exclaimed M. Noël, out of patience with this long preamble ; "let us see the style in which this learned professor writes !"

"Here it is !" replied Verdier, having meanwhile adjusted his spectacles on his large thin nose.

"MY DEAR FATHER :

"At last I have my liberty for three months, and I wish to spend the whole time with you. I shall be at home in less than a week. I promise myself great pleasure in embracing you once more, and in seeing again my house, my woods, and all the good things I have missed so long. I dance around my room like a child at the thought of the journey. I am obliged to examine my chin and feel my beard, to make me remember that I am a young man with serious purposes in life. Seven years without seeing you, without breathing the air of our forest—do you know how hard it is ? And yet I do not regret the time, for it has given me the opportunity of doing



work that will make a man of me, and give a little satisfaction to you, and to you all who have taken so much pains with me. When I speak of you, I include also my dear master, M. Noël. Is he not one of the family? Tell him I am coming home, and sound him adroitly, as well as my mother, to find out what I can bring from Paris that will please them."

"Fool that I am!" muttered M. Verdier coming to a sudden pause; "I ought to have skipped that line. And now Antoine has lost the pleasure of surprising you!"

"That is right!" grumbled M. Noël; "tell him I don't want anything."

He rubbed the back of his hand over his eyelids, and was indignant to find they were moist.

"This cursed chimney does not draw well," he continued, "and the smoke makes my eyes water; does it trouble you, Verdier?"

He turned his head and saw the dog, who had again stolen the crust from Master Jacques.

"Ah! you mean creature, you always will have the last word, and you have carried your point. They are all alike, M. Verdier; they are all alike!"

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## V.

“ Good morning, Bernard ; how soon shall we set out ? ”

“ The deuce ! Young man, you are as lively as a green lizard,” replied the coachman, who drove the mail-stage from Langres to Auberive. “ The clock of Saint-Mammès has just struck five, and I shall not stir until six. But,” he added, thrusting his red face out of the carriage, “ is that you, M. Antoine ? I said when you came back you would have a beard on your chin ; but I did not recognize you at first, you have grown so strong and handsome ! ”

Antoine Verdier was indeed a fine young man, thirty years old, with a rather slender figure, broad shoulders, an olive complexion, an abundant black beard, and a countenance on which seriousness and frankness were happily blended. Two features in his expressive face were specially noteworthy : his almond-shaped and downcast eyes, whence flashed a glance both caressing and penetrating, and his high and intelligent forehead, indented vertically between the eyelids by three light wrinkles, indicating habits of reflection and observation. His clearly-articulated words and his sedate and energetic gestures, combined with much gentleness, gave evidence of a well-balanced



nature and a man who was already master of himself.

He walked back and forth for a few minutes in front of the public-house, where the carriage, to which the horses had not yet been harnessed, stood under the stable porch. The dawn of a beautiful day at the close of August began to light up the deserted street, and he heard the reveille sounding from the barracks of the citadel.

"I am going ahead a little way," said Antoine to the coachman, "and I leave the care of my baggage to you, Bernard. You will overtake me at the hill of Pierrefontaine."

He passed through the sleeping town, descended the mountain by a steep path that led to the Noidant road, and followed with a light step the route covered with grass and dripping with dew. It was easy to see how happy he was by the way he walked and flourished his cane. He looked with a smiling face upon the pearl-colored sky, in which the sun had not yet appeared, and watched the waning moon grow pale as the dawn brightened. He listened to the waking notes of the skylarks, and remembered how many times, when he was in school at Langres, he had passed over this same road on Saturday evenings, when he had obtained permission to spend Sunday at home. The farm-houses scattered among the harvested fields, the huts of the road laborers, the small hamlets with flat stone roofs, defiled before



him like old friends with benevolent faces. He was on his way home, and the joy of the return, united with the charm of the clear morning, took possession of his senses more and more at every step. When he had passed Perrogney, and saw in the bright sunshine the green masses of the forest stretching out before him, his heart leaped for joy, and tears came to his eyes.

“Plague on Bernard !” he exclaimed ; “I should be a simpleton to wait for him, and to shut myself up in his coach when I can walk through the woods to Auberive with perfect ease.”

Instead of descending toward Pierrefontaine, he took the old Roman road, and reached the verge of the forest in a few minutes. An ancient Celtic tumulus, called the Feu de la Motte, still remains on this spot, and here he rested a moment before continuing his walk. At his feet, in a hollow of the ravine, the source of the Anjou gave utterance to its babbling voice, and in the distance all the cocks of the Crilley farm made themselves hoarse in their efforts to outdo each other.

How many times, in vacation, Antoine had found a seat in the tall grass of the tumulus, and forgotten everything else while absorbed in reading an old volume full of the history of celebrated men ! Sometimes he paused at the bottom of the page, and, his imagination excited by what he had read, listened until it seemed to him that the



fairies of the forest waked up around the old Celtic hillock to predict a triumphant destiny for him. The springing green branches of the beech-trees, swaying over his brow, seemed to murmur mutely, "You also—you will have a glorious future !"

Glory ! he had not yet come into possession of it, for reputation comes slowly in the career he had chosen. His path was, however, plainly marked out ; the brushwood and the quagmires were now behind him. His first discoveries had already attracted attention ; the accuracy of his botanical observations increased his reputation, while his highest endowment, the gift of intuition, that transforms a scientific man into an inventor and almost into a poet, held out the prospect of higher honors for the future.

Meantime he was young ; he had in reserve a long succession of fruitful years. His heart overflowed with feelings of gratitude. In a few moments he would kiss piously the soil of the forest, his native soil, which for many centuries had nourished the obscure generations of peasants from whom he had sprung.

He heard the shrill tones of the clock in Perrogney striking nine.

"Selfish fellow !" he thought ; "while you amuse yourself in dreaming, your good mother is counting the minutes. Bernard will arrive without you, and the whole family is anxiously watch-



ing for your appearance. Come, start as soon as possible."

He seized his cane, ran down to the base of the tumulus, and walked under the trees at a rapid pace. He had traversed a good quarter of the forest, when, in passing obliquely over a cross-road, he perceived a thick cloud of smoke in the most distant part of a forest-path lying in a diagonal direction. He even discerned the vague form of a man or woman making signals.

"What is burning out there?" he exclaimed, rushing at the same time impulsively toward the spot, when the words "Here! this way! Help!" uttered in loud tones, and evidently intended for his ears, made him redouble his steps.

Objects became more clear as he advanced. He soon distinguished a team standing in the midst of the path; a boy, fifteen years old, was rushing in headlong haste from the wagon to the steep bank of the road, dipping water there in his felt hat, climbing on one of the wheels, emptying his improvised bucket on the smoking mass, and then repeating the same process as fast as possible. On the border of the declivity a small horse, with the bridle hanging loose from his neck, browsed unceremoniously upon the shoots of the beech-trees; and in the middle of the road a young girl with bright-red hair, lifting with one hand the skirt of her riding-dress, waved the other in the air to urge Antoine to make haste.



“Come quick, monsieur !” she called out when he was within hearing distance ; “this boy has lost his wits, and his load of charcoal will burn up if we do not help him.”

Indeed, the dull crackling of a fire ready to burst forth was plainly heard from every part of the cart, full to the edge. The charcoal had doubtless been taken from the pit before the fire was entirely extinguished, and, once on the road, the current of air had rekindled it. The girl had been attracted by the smoke and the outcry of the driver, who tore his hair, knowing no longer to what saint to make his vows.

“I advised him,” she said, “to go to the spring and dip water from it in his hat.”

“Unfortunately,” replied Antoine, looking with surprise at the pretty speaker, who was no other than Mlle. La Tremblaie, “these few drops of water will only serve as nourishment for the combustion ; it will be necessary to throw out a part of the charcoal and spread moistened earth over the rest.--Is the charcoal-pit far from here ?” he asked the distracted driver.

“A good half-hour, monsieur.”

“Run as fast as you can, and let the coal-burners know of the accident ; tell them to bring a bucket, a shovel, and a pickaxe. Meanwhile I will pour water on the cart.”

“Mount my horse,” cried Raymonde ; “you will go quicker.”



The boy did not wait to be invited the second time ; he held out his wet hat to Antoine, mounted on the back of the horse, and started off in the direction of the pit.

"Can I be of any help to you?" said Raymonde when she was left alone with Antoine by the side of the crackling wagon.

"If you are not afraid of spoiling your dress," he replied, "you can fill this fellow's hat at the spring, and hand it to me as I stand on one of the wheels. But it will be disagreeable and fatiguing work, mademoiselle."

"I am not a fine lady!" she said, smiling.

She turned up her riding-dress, tied it behind, tossed her hat upon a clump of dogwood-trees, and began diligently to dip the water. As soon as the hat was full, she got up and gave it to Antoine, who, leaning against the wagon, rapidly poured the contents on the smoking charcoal.

Their attention was not so completely absorbed by the work as to prevent them from stealthily examining each other. Raymonde glanced out of the corner of her eye at the elegant bearing and expressive face of the young traveler, balanced on the nave of the wheel, his head in full light and his hair in a cloud of smoke played upon by the breeze.

As for Antoine, he could not help admiring the girl's graceful pose as she held out to him the streaming felt hat, and displayed at the same



time her beautiful bare arms. The upper part of her body being thrown back showed to advantage the harmonious and flexible outlines of her bust, the serpentine curve of her white neck, and the satin carnation of her cheeks, suffused with a delicate rose-tint by the excitement of the novel situation. The sun, filtering through the trees, threw a changing play of light and shade over her hair and face, that increased the fascination of her large brown eyes. The work, to which she was not accustomed, put her out of breath, and this, with her entire unconsciousness, increased the vividness and brilliant coloring of the picture, which impressed itself indelibly on the young man's fancy.

"You must rest, mademoiselle ; I will go and draw the water," said Antoine, touched with her good-will, and feeling as if it were a crime to condemn a charming person like her to such hard work.

"No, no," she replied ; "I assure you I am not tired."

"I beg you to rest a while," he repeated, jumping to the ground and taking the hat from her hands.

The young man's eyes had an expression of determination that impressed Raymonde. She bit her lips.

"You think I am too awkward !" she said, in an angry tone.



He repented his brusque words, and the serious expression of his face became suddenly almost caressing.

"On the contrary," he replied, smiling, "I admire you ; but you have worked enough. Besides, the coal-burners must soon be here."

A few minutes after, in truth, the trot of the little Breton horse was heard in a neighboring pathway, and the coal-burners, all out of breath, soon made their appearance on the scene of action. They brought with them the necessary tools, and went to work immediately. Antoine, impatient to reach his home, took leave of them after being assured that his assistance was no longer needed ; while Raymonde, running to her horse, adroitly readjusted the saddle.

"What a perspiration you are in, my poor Jannie," she said to the animal, patting him with her hand ; "I must let you take breath, and I can go on foot part of the way."

She gave a few light touches to her hair, which was flying in all directions, put on her hat, and rejoined Antoine, while the horse followed her like a dog. They walked rapidly to the place where four paths cross each other in the form of a star. Raymonde looked to the right and left in an undecided way.

"I am not familiar with this spot," she said ; "where are we ?"

"At the cross-road of La Tillaye," he replied,



"and this is the path that leads to— Are you going to Auberive, mademoiselle?"

"No, to Vivey. I live at the Maison Verte."

"In that case, be kind enough to follow me ; at the end of the forest-path you will see the road to Vivey. The Maison Verte is then inhabited? You must find this country a little wild?"

"I like anything that is wild. Besides, after having been immured for six years within the walls of dull boarding-schools, it is delightful to breathe the free air. At home, they allow me to do as I please, and I improve the opportunity as you see. I am in love with the forest."

"It is so beautiful!" said Antoine, growing animated. "There are many lovely spots in our woods that resemble a garden—this one, for example."

They had penetrated into a shady walk, inclosed between verdant slopes, planted with lindens and watered by springs flowing with a gentle murmur under the thick grass of the ditches. The shade and abundance of water had developed a luxuriant vegetation. Meadowsweet and tall master-wort grew in abundance by the side of the path; the slender stems of the foxglove threw here and there a purple tint in the midst of this confusion of gray umbels and pale aigrettes, over which large yellow butterflies flitted in the sunbeams.

Raymonde examined these details attentively,



and her bright eyes gave expression to both pleasure and surprise. She had never been in this part of the forest, and yet there was something strangely familiar about the landscape. It seemed as if she had seen somewhere these lindens with their tall and slender trunks, these beaten tracks trickling with moisture, and this purple foxglove. She stopped involuntarily, while Antoine, more impatient as he approached his home, continued to walk on. He turned round abruptly and saw her standing still in the middle of the road.

"Do I walk too fast for you, mademoiselle?" he asked. "Excuse me. Auberive is the village where I was born, my father and mother live there, and I am going home for the first time in seven years to pass my vacation."

"Oh!" she cried, hastening to join him; "I have hindered you. Are they expecting you?"

"They are expecting me without knowing exactly when I am coming. I announced my return without fixing the day, for I wished to surprise them; but I am sure that the house is already turned upside down, and that every morning my father and mother are on the watch for the mail-coach, saying to each other: 'He will surely be here to-day!' If the coach, which I left behind, should arrive before me, then farewell to all hopes of a surprise!"

Antoine's eyes were bright with impatient expectation. Raymonde examined her companion



with increasing interest, and compared mentally, not without a vague melancholy, the reception prepared for this son so ardently anticipated with the almost cold reception her mother had given her on her return from boarding-school. She envied the happiness of the household where the child and the parents seemed to be so closely united. The words that fell from the young man's lips were sufficient to give her a glimpse of a home serenely happy and almost patriarchal.

"I am very much troubled," she said, "to have made you lose a whole hour."

In raising her head, she encountered Antoine's eyes intently fixed upon her, and she was greatly disturbed. The young man's searching glances seemed to pierce to the bottom of her heart. Raymonde's long eyelashes met together as suddenly as the wings of a butterfly close, and she was much disconcerted. No glance had ever troubled her in this way before, and yet there was nothing offensive in the look; it was rather attentive and indulgent, but as if it had penetrated triumphantly into the depths of the soul. For the first time she felt herself in the presence of character and will.

"I do not regret the loss of this hour," replied Antoine courteously, in a tone both grave and gentle.

She did not seem displeased with the answer, but remained silent and hastened her steps. From



time to time she snatched in an absent-minded way handfuls of grass, and held them out to Janie, who munched them greedily. Suddenly she glanced at one of her arms and stopped, while her face slightly lengthened.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "I have lost my bracelet!"

The young man's brow contracted at the prospect of a new delay. Raymonde, hesitating, had already gone back a few steps; she divined rather than perceived the frown, and immediately, with an indifferent and irritated movement of the head, as if she were replying to some mysterious scruple—

"Bah! more's the pity!" she murmured. "Besides," she added, resuming her place at Antoine's side, "it was not pretty, and the loss is of little consequence."

Her companion, seeing her so easily consoled, did not insist upon helping in the search for it, and they went on at a rapid pace. In a few minutes they reached the end of the forest-path, and saw stretching out at their feet the valley of Auberive, with its wooded hills, the bridge like an ass's back thrown over the Aube, and the white road winding half-way up the hill.

"This is my native land," said Antoine, in a voice full of emotion.

"And these are probably your friends on the look-out for you," continued Raymonde, pointing



to two persons who were leaning against the parapet of the bridge.

They had seen the young man and were waving their caps in the joy of their hearts, while a yellow dog gamboled around them, barking with all her might.

“Heaven pardon me, these are my foresters of the Spring Valley !” said the girl.

“It is my father with my old master,” replied Antoine, his heart leaping for joy.

“In that case I must leave you, for I am not one of their friends.”

She held out her hand gently to the young man, who looked at her in perfect amazement.

“Adieu, monsieur ; do not keep them waiting. A pleasant vacation and many thanks !”

She mounted lightly on Jannie, and started off toward Vivey at a full trot.

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## VI.

“Ah ! my boy, is it indeed you ? is it you ?”

Sœurette Verdier had rushed to the front yard, thrown her arms around Antoine’s neck, and covered him with kisses that the young man returned with all his heart. After this first outburst of tenderness she drew back a little, in order to take a long look at her only child, whom she had not seen for seven years.



"After all," she said, "they have not quite swallowed you up; you have even gained in stoutness and strength. Only see how your beard has grown, and what a manly air you have! Ah! my poor little dear, if you could know how long the time was while you were in Paris!"

She threw herself again upon his neck, weeping.

"Come, Sœurette," said Verdier, in a stern voice, "be reasonable; this is not the time for crying."

But, even while reproving his wife, he could scarcely refrain from tears himself. He bit his mustache, winked his eyes, and turned to M. Noël, who regarded the affecting scene with an aspect of stern rebuke.

"These women!" he said to the old professor, while passing his hand over the back of his moist eyelids; "they always have tears in their eyes. What can we do with them?"

Sœurette Verdier was small, neat, and prepossessing; she walked with short steps like a mouse, drawled out her words, and wore a peasant's cap which discreetly framed the round face of a devotee, made pleasing by the light of soft gray eyes. Although her husband had a position under government, as they said in the village, she had preserved the simplicity, costume, and language of a countrywoman. If her narrow forehead did not announce a very keen intelli-



gence, she possessed quick sympathies and an affectionate and self-sacrificing nature. In her own home, maternal tenderness had invaded and taken possession of every cavity in her brain.

"I am sure you did not eat anything at Langres," she exclaimed, seizing Antoine's arm. "You must be faint with hunger! Go to your room now, and, while you are making your toilet, I will cook the dishes you like best—a good *potée* and a shoulder of mutton."

She conducted him with a brisk step to his chamber, whither his luggage had already been carried.

An hour after they were all reunited around a table covered with a spotless white cloth, on which smoked the local dish—the famous *potée* of cabbage and bacon. M. Noël, departing from his usual habits in honor of his pupil, consented for once to breakfast with them. It was pleasant to see them seated at table in the little gray hall, with its one window opening upon the garden. Antoine, ravenously hungry from his long walk, and happy in being once more at home, replied to the questions showered upon him from all quarters with perfect good-humor, while at the same time doing full justice to the viands set before him. Sœurette, in all her comings and goings, did not once take her eyes from him; Verdier and M. Noël did nothing else but look at him and ask him questions; and the dog went from one to



the other, uttering discreet little barks, and snapping up a morsel here and there.

“What !” exclaimed M. Noël suddenly, going on with his questions, “is P—— now a member of the Institute? He was my classmate,” he added, with a melancholy sigh ; “do you know him ?”

“Yes,” replied Antoine ; “I met him this winter at the house of the Minister of Public Instruction.”

“At the minister’s house !” exclaimed M. Verdier, his face brightening with paternal pride ; “do you then go to the minister’s ?”

“Yes, dear father,” continued the young man ; “I dine there sometimes. They do not have as good things to eat as we do here.”

“Hear him !” said the forester, glancing at Sœurette ; “he dines at the minister’s ! What a fortunate fellow !”

The worthy man at that moment would have rejoiced to see all the men in the village standing at the window, so that he might announce to them the marvelous news.

“And of what consequence is all that ?” interrupted M. Noël, scornfully. “I also have dined at a minister’s, and in my time it was at Villemain’s. This did not prevent me from throwing away my future. I hope Antoine will not become a frequenter of *salons*, and that he will never forget that science is the mistress who demands his entire



devotion. *Salons* and women are two pests for students."

"Be easy, my dear master," replied Antoine ; "I have in Paris the reputation of being a savage."

"This did not prevent you this morning," grumbled M. Noël, "from wasting your time in gallanting a young lady."

"What young lady?" asked Mme. Verdier, much alarmed.

Antoine told the story of his meeting with the young Ainazon in the forest-path.

"I do not even know her name," he said, as he finished.

"It is Mlle. La Tremblaie, the young lady of the Maison Verte," exclaimed Verdier ; "a giddy creature, who fears neither God nor the devil."

"A bold-faced woman !" growled M. Noël, who had not forgotten the blow of the whip that was the means of tipping over his mushrooms.

"I think you are severe !" said Antoine ; "she appeared to me like a very good girl, and I am sure she has a kind heart."

"Suppose we talk about something else," interrupted M. Noël, in a surly tone.

They sat around the table chatting for a long time. Then Sœurette took her son away under pretense of paying a visit to the garden. She wanted to have him all to herself, and was delighted to show him in detail the riches of her modest realm ; the poultry-yard with all its inhab-



itants, the rough-footed pigeons, the hens with topknots, and the Guinea-fowls speckled with black and white ; the bee-garden, with six buzzing hives and borders of savory and thyme ; the vine-arbor, where the grapes were beginning to be transparent ; the plum-trees, bending under the weight of the long purple fruit.

Antoine was very happy to find that the old garden looked exactly as he remembered it from his earliest childhood. The same knotty medlar-trees dipped their branches in the Aube, for the orchard bordered on the river. The branches of phlox and the hollyhocks grew in their accustomed places ; and in bending over a flower-border the young man recognized with emotion two slender green stems of harebell that he had brought from the forest fifteen years before, and which appeared every year in the spot to which he had transplanted it. The earth had faithfully guarded in its bosom the trust confided to it. Since that time Antoine had passed through the whirlpool of Parisian life, filled his brain with new ideas, received a thousand changing impressions, and all the while the little harebell had continued to bloom in this corner of the garden.

As an oak is riveted to the soil by the slender hairy filaments of the roots, so our hearts are attached to our homes by a thousand trivial ties, easily broken in themselves, but powerful in their number.



All the rest of the day was consecrated to affectionate pilgrimages to the shrines of former days. At night Sœurette accompanied her son to his chamber, helped him undress, and tucked him in bed as in days of yore. He was ready to fall asleep, while she moved softly about the room ; and, just as she opened the door to go out, she came back with an embarrassed air.

"Antoine," whispered she, bending over his pillow, "I am sure you do not say your prayers as you used to."

He embraced her, smiling without replying.

"Say a short prayer, my son," she continued, going away on tiptoe ; "it will be a great pleasure for me."

The door closed, and the man who had won distinction by scientific acquirements was touched to the heart by his mother's simple request.

The next morning, while he tasted the pleasure of being slowly awakened by the sounds of country life, Sœurette appeared with a bowl of warm milk and a large bouquet of roses. She resumed the habits of former times, and brought to his bedside his first breakfast with the first fruits of the garden. She sat down by him, and began to chat, perfectly happy in seeing him once more.

"I have already looked over your linen," she said ; "it is in a bad condition. Those Paris washerwomen use all kinds of drugs for bleach-



ing. And then, what disorder! everything is in fearful confusion. Do not talk to me of homes where there is no woman to watch over men's affairs! Do you know, Antoine, that you ought to be married now that you can take care of a wife?"

The young man smiled. Thus far the idea of marriage had seldom haunted his brain. Although he was neither a puritan nor an anchorite, women had played only a secondary part in his life. Parisian pleasures had rather amused his curiosity than charmed his heart. The life and seductions of great cities presented something too refined and artificial for this child of the forest.

"Yes," continued Sœurette, "you must find a good wife, well brought up and of good principles. Are there no such young ladies in the city where you are going to live?"

"My good mother," replied Antoine, "I have been so unsociable and shy that the young ladies whom I have met do not please me, and I have no power to please them. At eighteen they know everything of which they should be ignorant; they are precocious and unhealthy hot-house plants. I must have a wife as frank and natural as you are—a heart inclosed like a flower in a bud, which will open only for me, and know how to love only as I shall teach it. For this reason I shall not be likely to marry very soon."

"Certainly," exclaimed Mme. Verdier, "you



will never find all that in a Parisian. But there are women in other places besides Paris. There are plenty of girls well brought up and well provided for, and not far away from us either."

Alchemists were right in believing that certain words are endowed with a kind of magic influence; the charm works the moment they are pronounced. If they do not effect, as in former times, the transmutation of metals, they modify at least the form of our ideas, and change their direction. In consequence of this conversation, Antoine was mysteriously led to think of the girl whom he met at the cross-road of La Tillaye. He dressed slowly, went out to take the air, and a secret attraction carried him toward that part of the forest he had traveled in company with Mlle. La Tremblaie. When he reached the depths of the woods, the image of his companion of the day before took still more tyrannical possession of his thoughts. Who was this young girl, whose independent ways contrasted so strongly with the reserved habits of provincial life? Antoine remembered, not without pleasure, the chaste as well as haughty expression of her face, her pure and searching eyes, her frank and genial tone of voice. The manners of an adventuress would not have such perfect naturalness and such wild grace. He reviewed all the details of their conversation, submitted them to a minute analysis, and could not discover a particle of affectation or boldness.



While thinking over these things he had passed the cross-road and arrived at the same spot where he had met Raymonde. It was easily recognized, for the place where the cart stood was black with the remains of the charcoal, and the plants around the spring bore the imprint of footsteps. Antoine knelt down, dipped his hands in the current, and saw something glittering at the bottom of the water. He plunged his hand in farther, and brought to the surface Raymonde's bracelet, her rapid movements having without doubt unclasped the fastening. He examined the jewel with a curious eye, and read these words engraved on the enamel: "Think of me." This motto and the symbolic flower completing the device clearly announced the intention of the donor.

"Who gave her this present?" Antoine asked himself, not without a feeling of disenchantment. "After all, that makes no difference to me," he thought, ashamed of the absorbing interest he felt in the matter. "One thing is plain: I must send the jewel back to Mlle. La Tremblaie. To whom shall I trust the commission?"

Prudence advised him to send it by one of his father's foresters; on the other hand, a secret desire, a singular curiosity, impelled him to carry it himself. He put the keepsake in his pocket while deliberating, and turned his steps in the direction of Vivey. When from the top of the hill he came in sight of the Maison Verte, with



its avenue of lindens, green lawn, and windows bright with sunshine, he felt that a decision must be made. Just then he caught a glimpse of a girl of slender and graceful form, standing among the flower-beds with a watering-pot in her hand, and his hesitation vanished. He descended the hill of Vivey at a rapid pace, passed through the avenue of lindens, and did not stop until, all out of breath, he rang the bell at the gate.

He did not think it proper to ask for Raymonde, and, handing his card to the servant who opened the door, he asked her to take it to her master. A moment after, he was ushered into the library, where M. La Tremblaie was reading his paper, and Mme. Clotilde was embroidering a strip of tapestry. He made the best excuses he could for his morning visit, related briefly the circumstances of his meeting with Raymonde, and added :

“Mlle. La Tremblaie has doubtless told you that, in her eagerness to help the coal-burners, she had the misfortune to lose a bracelet?”

“Indeed!” interrupted Mme. Clotilde angrily, “she took good care not to breathe a word of it. She is always the same reckless child!”

Antoine cast a sly glance at the lady, whose look of assurance, low forehead, and bold and perfidious smile exerted a repulsive influence upon him.

“Do not be uneasy, madame,” he replied; “I



happened this morning to be passing through the cross-road of La Tillaye, and was fortunate enough to find your daughter's bracelet."

As he took the jewel from his pocket, the door was thrown open with a crash, and Raymonde, with her head uncovered and in her morning dress, rushed into the library. She uttered a cry of surprise and blushed deeply at the sight of the unexpected guest.

"Thank the gentleman who was kind enough to bring back your bracelet," said Clotilde, coldly.

"Here it is, mademoiselle," added Antoine, bowing and holding out the circlet of enameled gold.

She murmured her thanks in a few confused and almost inaudible words, not daring to raise her eyes; then, with no other manifestation of pleasure than a slight frown, quickly put the keepsake out of sight, and took a seat by her father's side.

"M. Verdier," said his host, who had thus far remained silent with his eyes fixed on Antoine's card, "I have often read scientific articles signed with your name. Is the author one of your relatives?"

"I am the author," replied the young man, smiling.

This discovery produced a sudden change in M. La Tremblaie's demeanor. He had formerly been much interested in the physiology of plants,



and, laying aside his usual reserve, he began to talk about his favorite study with an unaccustomed vivacity. Condemned to live for a long time in an atmosphere of frivolity, where his mental powers were diminishing day by day, a prey to a kind of moral consumption, he seemed to breathe a more salubrious air in the presence of one belonging to the world in which he once lived, a scientific man whose opinion was considered an authority. It was a rare piece of good fortune for this outcast, whose mind for five months had found no other resource than the dull and prosy conversation of honest Osmin de Préfontaine. Antoine, perceiving the childish joy of his host, answered his questions graciously, and the conversation was briskly sustained, going from Goethe to Darwin, from the metamorphoses of plants to the theory of natural selection.

Raymonde, delighted to see her father shaking off his habitual listlessness, leaned against the back of his chair, and, with her hands crossed, her neck stretched out, and her eyes wide open, listened attentively to the discussion. Oftentimes she could not understand it; but the grave and sympathetic voice of the young man charmed her simply by its intonations. Besides, his explanations were given in language so simple and lucid, his eloquence was so earnest and captivating, that his words seemed to have been dipped in the fountain-head of Nature itself, so deeply were they



impregnated with the sap and fragrance of his native forests.

In the course of the conversation the young man spoke of the curious peculiarities of certain plants growing in the vicinity.

"Be kind enough to bring me some specimens on your next visit," said M. La Tremblaie; "for I hope that you will come to see us often now that you know the way to Maison Verte."

Mme. Clotilde, who had a violent dislike for all serious conversation, manifested her weariness by ill-suppressed yawns.

The servant now appeared to announce that breakfast was served, and Antoine rose to take leave.

Contrary to the hospitable custom of the country, Mme. La Tremblaie did not consider it incumbent upon her to invite the visitor to take breakfast with them unceremoniously, and the timid M. La Tremblaie did not dare take it upon himself to make amends for his wife's impoliteness.

Antoine had already left the library and passed through the vestibule, when the rustling of a dress made him turn his head. It was Raymonde, who had rushed out of the room, indignant at her mother's inhospitality.

"Allow me to show you the way," she said, blushing, and, as cordial as her mother had been disagreeable, she made him take the longest path, stopping at every step to show him a flower, or



ask the name of a shrub. When they were near the gate, she said, with a pleasant smile on her face :

“I hope, M. Verdier, you will prove that men of science have memories, and will bring the plants you promised to my father.”

She smiled again, bowed, and left him under the charm of her parting glance.

He returned slowly through the woods, revolving in his mind the incidents of the morning, and thinking more than he ought of Raymonde's interesting face. His impressions were too confused to be analyzed, but they buzzed gently in his brain like bees ready to swarm, which whirl about in the air, uncertain of the place they will choose to construct their hive and distill their honey.

He was, however, in no hurry to fulfill his promise, and several days passed before he thought of going in search of the plants he had described to M. La Tremblaie. One evening he was walking with M. Noël on the Auberive road, talking over the course of study he had planned for future use ; the valley was undisturbed as usual, and the silence was broken only by the cool ripple of the Aube, and the distant sound of a horse's steps trotting on the stony road.

The peaceful trot suddenly changed to a furious gallop, and, before the two pedestrians had time to catch a glimpse of what was coming, horse and rider passed like a waterspout beside them in a cloud of dust. They had barely time to get out



of the way against the hill-side. When the first shock of the encounter was over, and the dust was partially dissipated, Antoine recognized Raymonde mounted on her fiery Breton horse. Without slackening her headlong pace, she turned her expressive face toward him, bowed in a manner indicating a reproach as well as a recognition, and disappeared in a fresh cloud of dust.

"The silly jade!" exclaimed M. Noël, sneezing and wiping the dust from his green surtout; "she came upon us without even crying out, 'Clear the way!' A little more, and she would have ridden over us! What else can be expected from the cursed race? Let it serve for a lesson to you, my dear son Antoine!"

This address produced little effect, for the next afternoon Antoine went to the turfy meadows of the Val Clavin in search of the promised plants. He chose the most beautiful specimens, and arranged a bouquet of balsams with delicate golden spurs, sundews, blue gentians, and all the charming flora of the hilly and humid greensward; then, passing through the woods with his sheaf of slender stems in their brilliant colors, he reached Vivey at sunset, dined at the village inn, and made his appearance at the Maison Verte just as he supposed the family had risen from the table. He was mistaken in his calculations, and was ushered into the dining-room as the dessert was being served.



“What lovely flowers !” cried Raymonde, when Antoine entered with his bouquet.

She went for a vase immediately, and arranged the flowers herself, the young man handing them to her one by one, and giving their names.

Mme. Clotilde appeared during this visit, if not more affable, at least more polite, and even deigned with her own white hands to pour the coffee into the cup placed near Antoine. The young *savant* was not sympathetic ; she felt that she was in the presence of a superior man, and dreaded that he might make too deep an impression on her daughter’s enthusiastic mind. Besides, whether she judged that affairs had gone too far with Osmin to admit of a possible rupture, or feared to arouse the spirit of opposition and revolt slumbering in the depths of Raymonde’s character, she deemed it imprudent to oppose openly the infatuation of her daughter and husband for the new-comer. She was an adept in dissimulation, and entertained the unwelcome guest with a show of cordial hospitality.

M. La Tremblaie soon managed to engross Antoine, and made him discourse for a long time on the peculiar habits of the plants he had collected. From time to time Mme. Clotilde, weary of all this science, interrupted her husband by interspersing a few commonplace remarks in the conversation.

Raymonde became suddenly silent. While



listening to Antoine's explanations, she could not help thinking that he was seated in the very place where Osmin was in the habit of stretching out his long limbs, and she made involuntarily a comparison between the two men, which was not to the advantage of her absent lover.

Why had not destiny placed first in her way this youth, with his low-toned voice, manly character, and serious and enthusiastic mind? She would have discouraged the vulgar homage of the colossal Osmin, and rejected the idea of a marriage with him. Perhaps—this vague hypothesis made her heart beat more quickly—perhaps Antoine would have loved her? She knew she was fascinating enough to make such a dream possible. A secret instinct told her that Antoine was not insensible to her beauty; if it were not so, would he have come back after her mother's rude reception? She certainly wished no harm to Osmin; but why had not his horse Pigeau overturned the carriage, and made him sprain his foot on the Lamargelle road on the day when for the first time he had driven in the direction of the Maison Verte? Antoine would have had time to arrive, and save her from the disgrace of having engaged herself so foolishly. Engaged! Was she really engaged? In Osmin's eyes, certainly; but in her own eyes, how was it? She had promised to try, and that was all. Alas! she had revolved in her mind over and over again every word she had



spoken for a month, and sought with legal ingenuity to lessen their import ; but a voice protested from the depths of her conscience, and cried out that she had encouraged Osmin, at least by her silence, that she ought to have rejected his proposal plainly and frankly. Since she had not done so, she found herself bound in honor to a man she did not love.

“ Well, Raymonde,” cried her mother, “ what are you dreaming about? We are waiting for you to go into the drawing-room.”

She roused herself, shook her head, and hastened to the adjoining room, where she prepared the table for the evening game.

“ Do you play *béziq*ue, M. Verdier?” asked Mme. Clotilde, who had a passion for cards, and, since Préfontaine’s departure, had condemned her husband every evening to wearisome and interminable games.

Antoine begged to be excused.

“ I will be the victim,” said La Tremblaie. “ Let the young people take a walk in the garden. M. Verdier, I commend my collection of chrysanthemums to your notice.”

Mme. Clotilde frowned ; the plan did not please her. She thought for a moment of accompanying Antoine and Raymonde, who were already descending the steps leading to the garden ; but the passion for *béziq*ue overcame her maternal solicitude, and she returned to the card-table,



where M. La Tremblaie was sitting resigned to his fate.

"Who is the little old man with whom you were talking on the road yesterday?" Raymonde asked Antoine, when they reached the garden. "His appearance is not attractive; does he live at Auberive?"

"No, he lives at Le Chânois."

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "he is the man with the yellow dog. I ought to have known him from the malicious look he gave me."

"Do not say anything against M. Noël," replied Antoine; "he is my old master, and the best man in the world."

"I should not judge so from his face!"

"His looks are against him, I confess; but his rudeness is like the lichen that collects around the oak, existing only at the surface, and leaving the heart sound and healthy. M. Noël believes himself a misanthropic man, and he is only a disappointed one. It was he who sent me to Paris, and everything that I am I owe to him. Therefore I love him as a father, and have always obeyed him as a master."

A feeling of spiteful jealousy took possession of Raymonde's heart while Antoine was enlarging upon the strength of the ties that bound him to M. Noël.

"He may have, inwardly, all the good qualities imaginable," she replied, drawing back dis-



daintily the corners of her lips ; “ that is of no consequence ; he makes me afraid of him, and I am sure he detests me.”

“ He detests all women,” said Antoine, smiling ; “ it is a question of principle with him.”

Raymonde fixed her eyes maliciously upon her companion. She was upon the point of asking : “ Has he inoculated you with this fine principle ? ”

The young man seemed to divine the question hanging upon her lips, and added :

“ It is the only point upon which we differ in opinion.”

“ Nonsense ! ” cried Raymonde ; “ this great hatred is probably nothing but spite. He has been jilted by some woman whom he loved when he was young.”

“ I know nothing about it. If this were the case, I should not blame him. Falsehood is always odious ; but a falsehood falling from the lips of a person dearly loved and implicitly trusted appears to me an unpardonable crime.”

The lines of his face took on a severe expression, and he spoke with an energy that frightened Raymonde. They walked on for a while without speaking a word, and then sat down in front of the drawing-room windows on a green bank adorned with thick beds of petunia. Night was coming on, the little wooded valley assumed more sombre shades, and the village sounds subsided one by one in the increasing obscurity.



The only light in the sombre façade of the Maison Verte came from the open doors of the drawing-room ; the only sounds that broke upon the stillness were the soft murmur of the stream, the shrill cry of a water-fowl among the rushes of the pond, and the indistinct voices of the two *béziq*ue players as they marked their points. Antoine and Raymonde watched the night fall over the woods with an emotion of dreamy enjoyment. They hardly spoke, while indefinable and peaceful thoughts took possession of their souls as darkness took possession of the outside world around them. A mysterious twilight enveloped them, where nothing was distinct and everything floated in a bluish and velvety shadow.

Raymonde threw her head back to get a better view of the stars that studded the sky, thus innocently revealing to Antoine's admiring eyes the undulating outlines of her form.

"How quickly the stars spring to life !" she murmured. "When I was a little girl, I tried to count them as they rose in the heavens, but I always went to sleep in the midst of the counting."

"It is the same in more important matters," said Antoine, smiling. "We scarcely catch a glimpse of what our hearts most desire when an invisible hand takes us away. In the midst of the *fête* we must leave, like children who are carried off to bed before the end of the play."

Raymonde started. "Did he speak the truth,



and was this charming hour, crowded full of enjoyment, the only one? Must she forget it like a beautiful dream, and return forever to the commonplace reality, with the pigeon-house of Larmargelle and Préfontaine's company in perspective?"

"Yes," whispered Reason; "you are Osmin's betrothed, and you have no right to dream of any other destiny. Let this stranger pass on his way, and continue to walk prosaically on your own monotonous road."

Antoine rose from his seat. "I must go!" he said; "I must bid you good-by."

Raymonde walked a few steps toward the house, and then stopped. She had consulted her reason; but, as almost always happens, she had asked advice and had not followed it.

"Are you going away from Auberive soon?" she murmured, with a slight tremor in her voice.

"No; I shall be here more than two months longer."

"Then you will come and see us again?"

She raised her head, and for a moment, under the starlit sky, their eyes met with deep and searching glances.

"I will come," replied Antoine, in a voice full of emotion.

"Certainly?"

"I promise you."

He took the hand she held out to him, and



the two hands were clasped more warmly than the conventionalities of worldly politeness would perhaps allow.

They parted at last, and Antoine, without saying another word, returned to the drawing-room to take leave of his hosts.

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## VII.

“ARE you looking for Antoine ? He has been gone more than an hour ; very little does he stay at home in these days, I can tell you !”

While M. Noël, to whom these words were addressed, frowned and muttered between his teeth, Sœurette Verdier, seated in a low chair shelling beans, went on :

“The truth is, Antoine is tired of us ; no sooner has he swallowed the last mouthful than he starts off on the road to Vivey. Heaven alone knows at what hour he will return ! My poor supper is often spoiled while we are waiting, and oftener still Verdier and I eat alone ; for they manage to keep Antoine to dinner over there almost every day. Once he used to pass his evenings with me, but now everything is changed ! I knew that wicked Paris would be the death of my boy !”

“Peace, Sœurette !” said Verdier ; “you



always exaggerate everything! Antoine is a good boy, but what can you expect? He is young, and we are old; he wants to be amused, and it is natural for him to go where he finds amusement."

"Amusement!" said Sœurette, shaking her head. "Faith! if he finds gayety there, he brings little of it here; for he is more dreamy and knows less what he is about every time he comes back! I can hardly get two words out of him! Nonsense! I am not so simple as I seem, and I can guess what kind of amusement he finds there. Bless me! I wouldn't say a word if he had taken a fancy to a modest and well-brought-up girl; quite the contrary, I assure you! But I fear he is madly in love with a heartless coquette, and this worries me to death. Who is this young lady at the Maison Verte, who has bewitched Antoine?"

"Pshaw!" said the forester, who wished to appear indifferent, but was in reality as much disturbed as his wife; "you see everything on the dark side. Antoine has good judgment; if he finds that the young lady is not worth caring for, he will turn on his heel and come back again."

"He will come back demoralized," snarled M. Noël, indignant at the forester's apparent resignation; "that is the way he will come back! Indeed, Verdier, your wife has more sense than you



have, though she is a woman ! You make my blood boil. Adieu !”

He went away muttering, while Sœurette wiped her eyes, and Verdier turned over the leaves of his day-book with a business air, to conceal his feelings. He was at heart as much troubled as his wife, for Antoine was the apple of the eye to them both. If they indulged in a little fault-finding during his absence, when he returned not a reproach or criticism escaped their lips. However, when he came home that evening, Verdier took him aside, and, putting on a careless air, said :

“By the way, Antoine, do you know what they say about you ? I do not speak for myself, but the good woman will have it that you are tired of us. You know her ; she would like to have you tied to her apron-strings all the time. How can it be helped ? Women are all alike. If you are wise, you will stay at home a part of the day to-morrow to make her feel easy.”

Antoine understood. His heart had already told him more than once the same truth that his father timidly intimated. Inwardly he reproached himself for neglecting his mother, and robbing her of the short days of his vacation to give them to another ; but each day a stronger attraction impelled him to take the road to Vivey. He was now an established guest at the Maison Verte. M. La Tremblaie, delighted to have some



one to talk to, managed to keep him as long as possible, and in truth no great effort was required; Raymonde's presence was sufficient. It was only at dusk, when returning to Auberive, that conscience asserted its power and reproached him in loud and persistent tones for neglecting his mother, and compelling her to wait so many hours for his return.

Early one morning, therefore, he went to the kitchen to find Sœurette, who was busy rubbing the andirons, and announced that he placed himself at her disposal for the whole day. The good woman almost suffocated him with the ardor of her embrace. As soon as her household duties were completed, she led her son to the garden, and entertained him with a minute account of the improvements she had made in the vegetable beds. Antoine helped her gather pears from the trees shaped like a distaff, and grapes from the vine-arbors, just as he used to when a school-boy. Everything went on well till noon; but, as the hour arrived when he usually started for the Maison Verte, Raymonde's image glided traitorously between him and his mother. A nervous impatience made him realize what an engrossing place this girl held in his heart. He had known her hardly three weeks, and it seemed as if she had formed a part of his life for many years. No woman had ever produced such an impression upon his fancy before. Was it on account of her



beauty alone? No; he had met many women more regularly beautiful, and they had never moved him in this way. Raymonde pleased him because she differed entirely from other girls. He admired her frank and impulsive nature, her ignorance of all feminine affectation, the virgin freshness of her mind, and the sincerity of her words. When Antoine's searching glances were fixed on Raymonde's clear eyes and haughty lips, he was convinced that those eyes and that mouth had never given expression to falsehood. He read there the chaste and proud assurance of a heart that had never condescended to waste its treasures in commonplace coquetry; and this purity of soul, united to an ardent and passionate character, exercised a powerful fascination over him.

After the mid-day repast, Sœurette placed her chair and a basket of linen that needed mending under the pent-house of the garden; then she began to work, chatting cheerfully all the time with her son, who was seated on a bench in the shade. She was happy beyond expression in being able to talk to him at her ease about domestic affairs, the village gossip, and the little details of the circle in which her thoughts revolved. All this time Antoine followed with an anxious eye the progress of the shadow of the roof on the garden-beds. He calculated mentally that it would only take him an hour to cross the forest and



reach the Maison Verte. He could pass a part of the evening there, even if he did not start till the middle of the afternoon. The sun already fell more obliquely on the white road, whose dusty track was visible as far as the verge of the woods; the skylarks were warbling in the fields, while from time to time he heard the report of a hunter's gun or the barking of a dog.

"What is Raymonde doing?" he thought. "Doubtless she is expecting me. I promised to dine with her at the Maison Verte."

And he seemed to see her walking impatiently on the sunny greensward, consulting her watch, and looking anxiously toward the part of the forest where the Auberive pathway opens.

"Antoine, you are not listening to me."

"Indeed, mother, you were telling me about Abdon, the tinman, and Lisa, the lame girl. Well, did they get married?"

"That shows how much attention you pay to what I say! I told you more than a quarter of an hour ago that Abdon's father had refused his consent, and the lame girl in despair had entered the convent of Saint Loup. Your mind is elsewhere, my boy!"

Antoine made a desperate effort to keep up the conversation, but his impatience increased as the minutes passed. The clock struck four, and its tones were borne slowly through the calm and



scorching atmosphere. The young man rose and walked up and down the garden.

"I feel the need of exercise," he said, in an insinuating way; "I have a mind to go as far as the woodland of Charbonnière."

"In this great heat?" exclaimed Sœurette, whose face lengthened.

"Nonsense! it is growing cooler; and then, isn't this your hour for going to church?"

"I did not intend going to-day," replied his mother, with a sigh; "but I don't wish to keep you against your will. Go, my son, if you are tired of staying."

He was already in the kitchen.

"Shall I wait supper for you?" cried Sœurette, desiring at least to let him understand that she was not deceived by his little stratagem.

Antoine, ashamed of his hypocrisy, turned back abruptly, threw his arms around his mother's neck, kissed her tenderly on both cheeks, and murmured: "Well, to tell you the truth frankly, do not wait for me. I am invited out to dine."

"Ah!" said she, giving back his kisses in full measure, "my poor lad, you are still very young for your age!"

He sprang for the road, and took long strides to make up for lost time. He crossed the forest at one stretch, and in three-quarters of an hour came in sight of the copse overhanging Vivey; but, as he was coming out of the woods, a dog



barked, a man started up from the foot of an oak-tree where he had been lying down, and Antoine found himself face to face with M. Noël.

"Ah ! it is you ? How are you then ?" exclaimed the old man, examining ironically his pupil's disconcerted countenance. "It is lucky I meet you in a nook of the woods, for there is little trace of your footsteps on the road to Le Chânois !"

"That is true, M. Noël," stammered Antoine. "I ought to go to your house oftener, but I have been prevented by some calls I had to make in the neighborhood, and I have also received proofs from Paris that must be corrected."

"You have a new work in press then ? So much the better ! You can tell me about it on the way, for I hope you are going home with me."

"Not this evening, M. Noël ; excuse me."

"Why not this evening ?" replied the professor. "Do your engagements oblige you to quit my company ?"

"Yes, I am going to Vivey, and shall stay there all the evening. I have promised, and I cannot break my word."

"Don't trouble yourself to make useless explanations," exclaimed the old man, losing all control of his temper. "I will tell you what keeps you at Vivey. It is the she-devil who lives in that cursed house !" He pointed with his thin



fingers, trembling with anger, to the slate roofs of the Maison Verte, then laid his hand on Antoine's arm, clasping it as if in a vise, and exclaimed : "Come away ! you were made for a better purpose than to become a prey to these adventurers."

Antoine blushed at M. Noël's first words, but quickly regained his self-possession, and replied, smiling :

"Your hatred of women carries you too far, my dear master ; this girl does not deserve the epithets you bestow upon her, and M. La Tremblaie is a worthy man."

"Let the father go for what he is worth," rudely broke in the professor ; "we are not speaking of him, but of his daughter, who has nearly bewitched you. You are simple-hearted like all students, and cannot comprehend the devices of these intriguing women. This one uses her eyes with marvelous power. Zounds ! They are brought up to this from their cradle. She flatters you with sweet smiles and cajoling words, and you allow yourself to become a victim to her coquettish arts. I know all about it !"

"You are mistaken !" replied the young man sharply. "Mlle. La Tremblaie is precisely the contrary of what you say. There is not a grain of coquetry in her whole composition. She has grown up like a wild plant, with the characteristics and defects that belong to such a development ; she is



fantastic, willful, and eccentric, but she is good, frank, and simple-hearted."

"The pest!" said M. Noël, in a rage; "you seem to have studied her conscientiously."

"Yes, she interests me! I watch her closely, and discover in her treasures of simplicity and sensibility."

"And when you have finished this analysis, so worthy of a *savant* of high purposes," continued the old man, sarcastically, "what do you intend to do with your subject?"

"I intend to ask her to become my wife," replied Antoine, in a decided tone; "that is, if I find that she loves me, for thus far I cannot tell the state of her feelings in regard to me."

"You are foolish enough to think of getting married!" exclaimed the indignant professor.

"Why not?"

"Because, unhappy child, marriage is an obstacle to all serious study. Even allowing this charmer to possess all the virtues with which you endow her, she is none the less a woman. The more she loves you, the more she will look upon science as an odious rival; the more she will seek to appropriate to amusement the hours destined for study. The rustling of her skirts will put to flight your ideas, the sound of her prattle will fill your study, and her caresses will enervate you and bring down your exalted ideal. When you have lost all courage, strength, and authority, when



you are empty—listen to what I say—empty as a gourd from which the pulp has been removed, then she will reproach you for not being a great man ; her vanity will be wounded ; she will despise you and give you the slip. Come away, I tell you ; and, if you love me, do not marry that girl ! ”

“ My dear master,” replied the young man energetically, freeing himself from M. Noël’s furious grasp, “ I owe everything to you, and am ready to do all you ask that is reasonable and just ; but your ideas in regard to matrimony prove nothing against Mlle. La Tremblaie personally. Give me a good reason for discontinuing my visits to the Maison Verte, and I will obey you unless—”

“ Ah ! you wish for better reasons,” cried M. Noël, his face burning with excitement, and his eyes darting lightning glances. “ Very well ! ”

He stopped, bit his lips, cast down suddenly his weary eyelids, and, becoming very pale, said :

“ Very well !—No,” he added abruptly, “ follow your destiny, obstinate fellow, and fall into the snare ! The decrees of fate cannot be changed, and I am a fool to mix myself up with your adventures. Good-evening ! ”

He whistled for his dog and plunged into the woods. Antoine watched for a moment the old man’s figure as it diminished in the distance, then shrugged his shoulders, and dashed down the hill of Vivey. As soon as he passed through the gate



of the *Maison Verte*, he saw Raymonde walking impatiently on the lawn, darkened by the lengthening shadows of the gables and turrets.

"How late you are!" she said, a bright smile lighting her face. "I began to think you had broken your word. That would have been a great pity, for my mother has gone to Langres, and will not return till late in the evening; my father is alone, and we three will dine delightfully all by ourselves."

In truth, thanks to the absence of Mme. Clotilde, a sweet and familiar intimacy was enjoyed during the whole dinner between these three sympathetic beings, unconstrained by the inquisitive eyes and wearisome conversation of the mistress of the mansion.

M. La Tremblaie, released from his wife's absorbing sway, felt all the freedom of a schoolboy playing truant. His mind revived, his tongue was unloosed, and he poured out his wine in larger measure, as if to convince himself that he had recovered his liberty of action. Thus dinner was prolonged far into the evening, and the three friends had hardly finished dessert before the first shades of twilight were gliding along the hangings of the dining-room. M. La Tremblaie threw himself into a comfortable chair, and, fatigued by the nervous expenditure he had made, rocked back and forth in an idle way, leaving the conversation to be carried on by the young people,



and contenting himself by replying occasionally with a vague smile to their witty sallies. By degrees his head fell back, and sleep took possession of his senses.

"He is asleep," whispered Raymonde; "that often happens after dinner. Do not appear to notice it, and we will go into the library. Give me your hand, and I will guide you, lest you waken him by hitting against the furniture."

She raised the heavy curtain that separated the two rooms, and they slipped out on tiptoe. The library was entirely dark, and Antoine was in no hurry to let go his hold of the girl's little hand. A strange emotion of delight thrilled through his whole frame as he felt it within his grasp, warm and trembling like a captive bird. They stood for a moment in the darkness without moving; then Raymonde, slowly disengaging her hand, groped her way to the pier-table, and lighted a lamp, whose dark shade threw a round luminous spot in the middle of the inlaid floor, while the rest of the room was still left in shadow.

"There!" she said; "now we can stay here quietly till he wakes. The servants are accustomed to see him go to sleep occasionally after dinner, and they have orders not to disturb him. We can talk, if you think it worth while to talk to a little girl so ignorant as I am."

"Your pretended ignorance," replied Antoine, sitting down near the divan on which she had



thrown herself, "is precisely what charms me most."

"*Charms!*" she murmured; "the word is very strong. I thought you learned men never exaggerated."

"The word expresses exactly what I feel," he replied briefly. Then he was silent and absorbed in thought, all the time watching her slightest movement; for in the dim light that enveloped her he could plainly discern the undulating lines of her supple form, the shadowy profile of her face, the tip of her ear immersed in the waves of her hair, and the exquisite curve of her eyelids, bent down as if waiting for him to make the next movement.

In this profound silence Raymonde neither dared to look at him nor speak to him. Her womanly instinct forewarned her that the moment had come when the young man would take courage and open his heart. She had a presentiment that a declaration of love was even then hanging upon his lips, and her mind vibrated between the desire and the fear of seeing him break away from the reserve he had thus far maintained. Her heart beat rapidly, and her hand nervously twisted the fringe of the divan. She understood meantime that her silence increased the embarrassment of the situation, and longed to break it.

"I am so foolish," she said—and it seemed to her that her voice had doubled its volume in the



intense stillness—"I am surprised that a man who knows so much as you do can take any pleasure in my conversation."

"I do take a great pleasure in it," he answered ; "so much so that, when I am away, nothing else interests me. Still, every time I leave you, I feel that I have not said a single word to you of what is uppermost in my mind. Mlle. Raymonde, I—"

He stopped abruptly. No, he thought, not yet ! Let her have time to get better acquainted with me before revealing my secret. And his lips closed upon the sentence already begun.

She listened with her eyes shut. When she heard him pronounce her name, a delicious shudder of anxiety ran through her whole frame ; then, perceiving that he had become silent, a confused feeling of having been mistaken succeeded the emotion of breathless anticipation. She opened her eyes, and, turning half-round, murmured shyly : "What did you say ?"

He had become master of himself, and, shaking his head, replied :

"An idea came into my mind, and I hesitate to tell you what it is, lest you should not receive it favorably. How I wish my mother knew you—she would love you so much !"

Raymonde raised herself on her elbow, and smiled with a mingled sensation of disappointment and satisfaction ; for, taken in good part,



the wish expressed by Antoine was a kind of delicately-veiled declaration.

“Are you sure of it?” she asked. “Your father has a poor opinion of my character; who knows if I should not produce the same effect upon your mother? And yet I loved her from the first moment I heard you speak of her. You cannot believe what an impression you gave me of a happy home, when, in the wood of La Tillaye, you described the impatience with which they were waiting for your arrival. I longed to be there myself and witness the happiness of your parents as they received with open arms the son from whom they had been separated for many years! I thank you for having anticipated my wish, and one of these mornings Jannie and I will pay you a visit.”

“When you see my mother,” continued Antoine, “you will be sure to like her. She is a good woman, very religious and simple-hearted. The frankness of your nature will go straight to her heart.”

“Frankness? Certainly that is true,” murmured Raymonde; “but is that such a great virtue that you place it above all the other qualities that may belong to me?”

“It is the most important quality. A woman who is not sincere and natural may be admired, but she cannot be esteemed.”

“In short, you would consider me a kind of



small monster if my conscience were burdened with the slightest falsehood ? ”

“ You could not speak falsely ! ” he exclaimed ; “ your eyes are too clear to have ever allowed an untruth to trouble their peaceful depths.”

While he was speaking, it seemed to Raymonde as if Osmin’s colossal shade suddenly arose from the remotest part of the library, regarding her with eyes full of reproach, and menacing her with its giant finger. Her conscience reproached her, and her face took on a serious expression.

“ You think me better than I am ! ” she said, shaking her head.

Antoine made a movement of incredulity.

“ What,” he went on, seizing her hand and smiling, “ do you pretend that you are capable of telling a falsehood ? ”

His face had involuntarily approached hers, and Raymonde felt rather than saw his tender and uneasy glances fixed upon her eyes, as if they would read their deepest meaning.

“ I did not say so,” she cried out ; “ only I do not wish you to be deceived. Like everybody else, I have little sins weighing upon my conscience.”

He still held her hand. “ Come now,” he insinuated in a gentle tone, “ tell them to me, will you ? ”

She remained undecided, and still felt that she ought not to lose the opportunity for confessing



her entanglement with Osmin. The hour was propitious, they were alone, and the lamp, discreetly shaded, plunged into shadow the corner where she was reclining, so that Antoine could not see her blush ; besides, he seemed disposed to be indulgent to her faults. She took courage and decided to tell the whole story.

“Well, then !” she began—

At that very moment the curtain of the dining-room was violently thrust aside, and Mme. Clotilde appeared before the disconcerted young people. They had barely time to unclasp their hands.

“What are you plotting in that corner ?” demanded the lady, throwing upon them a suspicious look.

Antoine arose, and Raymonde slowly raised herself from the divan.

“We were waiting,” she replied, “for my father to waken.”

“You did not find the time long, it appears !” observed Mme. Clotilde, ironically. “Your father went to his room half an hour ago ; I am weary with my long drive, and I wish to retire also.”

Antoine understood that his presence was not desired, made his excuses briefly, and took leave of the mistress of the house.

When he had gone, Mme. Clotilde lighted a candle, and, presenting it to her daughter, said sharply :

“My dear, endeavor in future to be a little



more reserved, and do not spend hours in a *tête-à-tête* with a young man whom you scarcely know at all. This is highly improper. If M. de Préfontaine should hear of it, he would be much displeased, and would have good reason for being so."

Raymonde, entirely discomfited, took the candle extended to her, and went out without saying a word.

Mme. Clotilde, when she found herself alone, placed the lamp on the table, sat down, and became absorbed in a meditation which was not specially favorable to Antoine. This youth had interfered with her plans, and she hated him. Raymonde, doubtless, was in love with him, and ready to sacrifice Osmin to her new fancy. But such a result was not according to this worldly woman's taste. She wished to bestow her daughter upon a person of distinction in the canton, an influential neighbor, who would introduce his relatives to the Maison Verte, and open to its occupants the doors, hitherto closed, of the honorable houses in the vicinity. But to have for a son-in-law the son of an obscure forester, a professor without fortune and without position in the country, who would take Raymonde to Paris, and leave her alone with her husband in the depth of the woods ! No, she could not think of such a thing, and she must nip this love affair in the bud. She took a sheet of paper and wrote the following letter to Préfontaine :



“MY DEAR OSMIN : You stay away among the mountains longer than you ought. Raymonde is impatient, and charges me to tell you that she finds the time rather long and her lover a little indifferent. You know, my dear friend, how impulsive she is ; do not leave her to seek amusement with some one else, and commit some thoughtless deed. Think that the absent are in the wrong, and remember the proverb : Who goes to the chase loses his place. Make your uncle understand that yours is by the side of your *fiancée*, and return as soon as possible.”

When the letter was sealed, she gave it in charge to the servant-boy, telling him to carry it himself at dawn to the post-office at Auberive. This duty fulfilled, she retired to her chamber with a firm faith in Osmin's speedy appearance, and went to sleep with the clear conscience of the mother of a family who has properly fulfilled her duties.

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## VIII.

It was near the end of September. The forest, busily at work in changing its summer garb into the costume of autumn, was enshrouded in a white veil of impenetrable mist. It seemed as if the drop-curtain of the theatre had fallen between



it and the spectators. One morning, however, the curtain was raised, and the magnificence of the new scenery displayed in all its glory. The sky was of a delicate blue, the meadows were spangled with flowers; while, on the forest borders, the crab-apple and beam trees scattered over the brown soil their purple leaves. The woods resounded in all directions with the barking of dogs, and the Sunday bells filled the sonorous air with silvery tones. Antoine went early to the Maison Verte, and every one in the house felt the peaceful influence of the beautiful day. M. La Tremblaie was almost gay; Raymonde could not keep still in one place; Mme. Clotilde herself was all honey and sugar. A secret and skillfully-restrained joy softened the sharpness of her voice, rounded the angles of her character, and quieted her malicious disposition.

“Where are all these people going to, dressed in their Sunday clothes?” exclaimed Raymonde, who was looking out of the window. “They are all taking the road to the woods of Charbonnière.”

“It is St. Michael’s day,” replied Antoine; “they are on their way, doubtless, to the *rapport* of Amorey.”

“What is this *rapport*?”

“A festival celebrated in the woods near a miraculous fountain. Every one goes to it from far and near.”



"Father," said Raymonde, abruptly, rushing to M. La Tremblaie and throwing her arms around his neck, "if you were good, you would have the horse harnessed and take us to the *fête*."

"Would you like this drive, my dear?" says La Tremblaie timidly, to Mme. Clotilde.

"You know very well that the open air has a bad effect upon me, and that jolting gives me the headache. But you can go without me. M. Verdier will be your guide. Only start as soon as you can, and return before dark."

Half an hour later the carriage rolled slowly under the woods, and then, with much jolting, gained the forest-road leading to the valley of Amorey. Raymonde had made herself fine, and a small round felt hat, coquettishly placed on the rich masses of her red hair, gave a free-and-easy expression to her face. She sat on the front seat by the side of the driver, and from time to time, when the carriage grazed the slope of the narrow road, gathered at random dogberries and beam-berries, and then, turning to the back seat where M. La Tremblaie was talking with Antoine, threw over them handfuls of red berries and green leaves. When they reached the bottom of the hill, distant sounds announced that the festival was in full progress, and all at once, at a turn of the road, the valley of the Moulineaux lay spread out before them.

On the right and left the ancient forests, stud-



ded with massive trees rising like pyramids, formed a framework for the meadow-land, where the *fête* was going on. The motley and noisy crowd moved restlessly about on the close-cut grass. The men were drinking, seated on the benches of an improvised wine-shop ; the women, with caps of violet-colored cloth bordered with black lace, flocked around a dozen shops where beads, medals, and confectionery were sold ; the children hung to their skirts, and cast covetous glances toward the piles of gingerbread in the shop-windows. Farther on, two violin-players, perched on a stage, gave forth the shrill music for a dance, in which the young people of the neighboring villages joined. This was, indeed, the best part of the *fête*. The girls, decked in their pretty dresses and smart neck-handkerchiefs, their heads adorned with linen caps trimmed with colored ribbons, danced with a quiet movement, a sedate air, and eyes slyly cast down ; the young men, their hats on one side, their new blouses carelessly open to show their Sunday vests, danced with more lively gestures, a more erect carriage, and more animated countenances. After each figure they lifted their partners in their arms and then put them down again with a cry of joy. There was something healthful in this spontaneous and sonorous laughter. The air was full of the noisy music, even to the forests of beech-trees, whose huge shadows lengthened slowly and progressively toward the



rustic ball, as if to warn the dancers of the flight of time and the brevity of human enjoyment.

Sometimes a couple deserted the dance, and made their way to the clump of aspens where the miraculous fountain glided in clear sheets over steps of Nature's handiwork, and then hollowed out for itself a reservoir in the porous stone. The principal property of this calcareous water lay in its power of slowly petrifying the roots and mosses over which it flowed. But the country girls cared little for this virtue, while popular belief attributed to it a still more marvelous characteristic—that of revealing to maidens whether they would be married within a short time.

The consultation of the oracle was carried on in the following fashion. The maiden threw a pin into the reservoir. If it fell in a straight line to the bottom, the marriage would take place within the year; but, if it deviated, being drawn away by the current, farewell to the wedding; the maiden ran the risk of being an old maid.

Antoine had explained to Raymonde the virtues of the fountain.

"I must try this experiment," she said.

She approached the reservoir, took a pin from her corsage, and let it fall down upon the clear surface. The pin, without a second's delay, descended perpendicularly to the bottom of the spring, where hundreds of others were already sparkling in the sunlight.



"Nonsense!" murmured the girl, as if she were replying to a secret thought; "the absurd omen! The important thing is not to know when I shall be married, but whom I shall marry."

She turned to Antoine, and saw his penetrating eyes fixed upon her.

"Those who consult the oracle," replied her companion, "have probably made up their minds on the latter point, and therefore are only interested in the former one."

Raymonde blushed, and, starting back to the pathway, returned slowly to the ball. When she heard the violins and saw the dancing, a new fancy entered her head, and she said to Antoine:

"I am sure you have never danced?"

"Never."

"Very well!" she continued; "are you willing to try?"

It was of no use to refuse and protest that his ignorance would throw every thing into confusion; she insisted so persistently that he ended by obliging her. They were in search of a *vis-à-vis* when M. La Tremblaie made his appearance. The hubbub of the *fête* irritated his nerves; he was tired out, and could stand the uproar no longer.

"The horse is uneasy," he replied to his daughter's indignant exclamations; "it is late, and we have promised to be home before night."

"How provoking!" exclaimed Raymonde. "If you were good, you would take your seat



quietly in the carriage, walk the horse on the road toward home, and as soon as our quadrille is finished we will overtake you by the cross-road."

M. La Tremblaie was not satisfied with this arrangement, but he had never in his life known how to refuse anything to her. Yielding therefore to her entreaties, he murmured :

"Willful child ! do as you wish, but remember your promise. I shall drive as slowly as possible, and wait for you at the foot of the hill. I entrust her to you, M. Verdier."

As soon as the carriage had set out for Vivey, Raymonde cried, "Now we will dance !" and darted into the midst of the ball.

The open air, the autumnal sun, the noise of the *fête*, and the consciousness of being alone with Antoine in the crowd, excited her beyond measure. Her dark eyes sparkled, her lips were wreathed with smiles, her supple form swayed gently back and forth in obedience to the rhythm of the violins.

"Ladies' change !" called out one of the musicians, in nasal tones.

She held up her skirt gracefully, advanced toward the peasant girl who was her *vis-à-vis*, and gayly held out her hand. The couples mingled, and joined hands and unjoined them in time with the music. The appearance of this beautiful young girl in a city toilet aroused the curiosity of the peasants. They formed a circle around her, and comments were made in all di-



rections. Antoine, while performing awkwardly his *rôle* in the figure, heard a peasant girl whispering to her companion :

“Isn’t that the young lady of the Maison Verte ?”

“Yes, and the youth who accompanies her is Verdier’s son, of Auberive.”

“He is her sweetheart, then. They told me that M. de Préfontaine was her lover.”

“What of that, my dear ? She has changed her mind !”

“Galop !” called out the musician again. The couples crossed over, turned about, and Antoine could not catch the rest of the conversation.

“Alas ! it is finished !” sighed Raymonde, courtesying to her partner.

“We must go,” said the young man, briefly, adding that it would be better to return by the forest-road.

“No,” replied the girl, rearranging her hair ; “there is nothing more tedious than to go back by the same path. It is much better to go through the woods. You certainly know the way, do you not ?”

Antoine objected strongly to the plan. He said that the appearance of the woods had changed in seven years, the clearings had become copses, and the paths had disappeared in the thickets ; but she would not listen to his advice. They kept along the meadow as far as the farm



of Amorey, and then entered a path cutting obliquely the forest of the reserve. Antoine was thoughtful, and replied to Raymonde's questions in monosyllables. The conversation of the two peasant girls occupied his thoughts. The allusion to M. de Préfontaine had left a disagreeable impression upon his mind. He remembered hearing Mme. Clotilde mention this person, but the name, uttered in ordinary conversation, had not then aroused his attention. The peasant girl's remark was probably nothing but village gossip, and yet it troubled him very much.

Raymonde watched her companion slyly, and was much displeased at his disagreeable mood.

"You are anxious," at last she said ; "what is the matter with you ?"

Antoine raised his head and gazed earnestly upon her frank and open countenance as if he would read her secret thoughts.

"Mlle. Raymonde," he replied, after a moment's silence, "the other evening, when Mme. La Tremblaie entered the library, you were on the point of telling me something—something that seemed to be of great importance in regard to yourself. At least I fancied I read this in your eyes ; was I mistaken ?"

She did not say a word in reply, and devoted her attention to digging little holes with the end of her umbrella in the soft earth of the pathway. He went on :



“If you really think me worthy of confidence, why will you not improve this opportunity when we are alone to tell me what you intended to confess to me? Do not the silence and increasing obscurity of this forest invite you to open your heart as well as the library at the Maison Verte?”

The disconcerted expression on the girl's mobile features plainly indicated the embarrassment produced by her companion's persistence, but still her lips were closed. Mme. Clotilde's sudden intervention seemed to have paralyzed the good impulse that had urged Raymonde to own everything to her lover. The propitious occasion had passed; now she was timid and undecided. An hour of delightful intimacy was before her, and it would cost her too much to disturb its enjoyment by a disagreeable revelation. Antoine's persistent and inquiring glance frightened and irritated her.

“Come,” continued he, “take me for a confessor!”

“I have nothing to confess,” she replied, turning away her head, and added, with a smile a little forced: “Conscientiously, I cannot invent sins!”

Antoine frowned, and replied in an irritated tone:

“Of course, I do not ask you to invent. Besides, I know perfectly well that I have no right to become the confidant of your secrets.”



"Why do you insist, then?" she exclaimed.

"Who makes you think I have secrets?"

"Who? Yourself."

"I? Oh!"

"Yes, you—or at least the disturbed expression of your face, so little made for deception."

He drew near to her, and said in a more emphatic tone: "Remember our conversation in the library, and tell me—"

"What?"

Antoine's eyes fell upon the girl's wrists, which he saw beneath the loose ruffles were without ornaments.

"Tell me, for instance," he continued, "who gave you that bracelet adorned with a motto, that I found in the spring of La Tillaye?"

Taken unawares by this demand, Raymonde blushed, and her perplexity increased. The question was singularly connected with the subject of her thoughts. But must she speak and tell the ridiculous story of Osmin's love, with all its trivial particulars? The concession was humiliating; and, besides, she could not tell what effect it might produce. The idea of being brought into competition with such a rival would perhaps frighten Antoine away, and then she must give up forever the sweet dream of tenderness, the conquest of that heart of priceless worth, whose increasing sympathy she watched with emotions of delight! Nevertheless, she must make some



response, or the question would be repeated, and, like all women, she got out of the difficulty by a subterfuge.

"What good will it do you to know?" she said, trying to assume a jesting tone.

"None whatever; you are right," he replied, wounded at her frivolity.

He commenced striking the brushwood with his cane, and they remained silent for some time. The path was narrow. Raymonde led the way, with her head bent down, and so troubled that she went straight forward without noticing the numerous paths crossing the one which they were walking. Antoine, absorbed in his ill-humor, followed her mechanically without giving a thought to the course he was taking.

"You are angry?" she said, turning round to speak to him.

"I? No. I see, however, that I have been indiscreet, and therefore I am silent."

"You see a great deal! There is a spiteful feeling in your heart toward me, I am sure. Why do you attach so much importance to matters of no consequence?"

"Of no consequence?" he answered, shaking his head. "Are not bracelets of this kind, called *parte-bonheur*, considered as keepsakes to which some sentimental superstition is attached?"

"That is a matter of fashion! Every one wears them, and they are gifts of no importance."



“Is that the case with yours?”

“Mine— To begin with, I do not wear it any more ; it is neither beautiful nor in good taste !”

“The person who gave it to you would not feel flattered by the way you speak of the gift. You appear to attach little value to this expression of his affection.”

“Certainly not !” she answered, with a nervous smile and heightened color.

He noticed her anxiety, and was only partially satisfied with her explanation.

“Acknowledge,” he continued, in an emphatic tone, partly ironical and partly serious—“acknowledge that an indifferent person shows a remarkable degree of self-conceit in presenting a jewel on which is engraved ‘Think of me,’ with a pansy around to make the meaning plainer? What is the name of this eccentric friend?”

“His name is of little consequence ; you do not know him.”

“How can you tell?” he replied, in the same sarcastic tone. “Was it M. de Préfontaine?”

Her heart beat rapidly. “What makes you think so?” she exclaimed, much frightened. “Who told you anything about him?”

“I heard your mother speak of him. He is your neighbor and a visitor at the Maison Verte?”

“Yes !”

“Why does he not come to see you now?”

“He is away making a visit.”



These answers were given in as few words as possible, and in an abrupt manner indicating great nervous irritation.

"He was a little in love with you—you may as well own it!" said Antoine, his face taking on a more melancholy expression.

"It is possible. I concerned myself little about it."

"Did he tell you so?"

She turned round suddenly, her eyes full of tears, stamped her foot indignantly, and exclaimed in a voice broken by suffering and irritation:

"Why do you persecute me in this way? What do you mean by asking me these odious questions? I wish I had gone back in the carriage with my father."

She walked on at a rapid pace all the time she was talking, and suddenly uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Ah!" she said, "where does this path lead to?"

They had reached one of those hillocks made of stones that are found in some of the forests of the Langrois mountains. The path at this point, or rather the narrow opening where they found themselves, descended almost perpendicularly to the bottom of a wooded gorge. They could see the stony outline as it passed between two colonnades of beech-trees and then disappeared in the distance.



"We have taken the wrong road," said Antoine, "and are wandering far out of our course."

Raymonde laughed heartily; then, the expression of her face changing rapidly from merriment to anxiety, she cried out in a contrite voice :

"What will my poor father think, who is waiting for us all this time? Many thanks, monsieur; you are an excellent guide! What will become of us?"

Antoine examined the direction of the ravine, and tried to find out where they were.

"Courroy is on the left," he said; "as soon as we reach the village, we can easily regain the road to Vivey. If you are not tired, and are not afraid of tearing your dress, we had better go through the forest."

"Come on!" she replied, bravely.

From the bottom of her heart she blessed the incident that put an end to the dangerous inquiries by which she had been tortured without mercy. In a quarter of an hour they reached the copse, but no path was yet visible. Antoine stopped, inhaled a long breath of the forest air, and said :

"I smell charcoal-smoke. We must be near a coal-burner's place. If we can find it, some one will guide us to the right road."

They walked on in the direction from which the pungent odor of the charcoal seemed to come, but the passage through the underwood became



more difficult as they advanced. Briers, intermingled with hawthorn-bushes, barred their passage every minute, and clung maliciously to Raymonde's dress. Antoine was obliged to stoop down and release the fragile foulard, of which it was made, from the grasp of the thorns, and all this took time. The woods were growing dark already, and soon the last purple rays of the setting sun disappeared among the branches of the beech-trees. Just at this moment the young girl gave utterance to a cry of despair. The flounce of her skirt, caught in a sweet-brier bush, was half ripped from the dress. Her foot passed through it; she tripped and fell, increasing the rent and entangling her leg as far as the knee.

"Have you hurt yourself?" exclaimed Antoine.

"No, no," she answered, blushing; "but don't look at me; I know very well how to get out of the trouble by myself."

She managed to rise after considerable effort, and, to prevent another fall, was obliged to take under her arm the fragments of the unlucky skirt, while she reiterated to Antoine, in still more emphatic terms, the request to go on in advance, and not look behind. At last the thicket was passed; they reached a clearing of the wood that occupied the whole slope of the gorge, and saw in the twilight the blazing red light from the charcoal kilns.

Seven or eight conical hillocks appeared in a line, with spaces between them, on the declivity



recently cleared, where the trees of the reserve still remained, while piles of wood scattered here and there in long, gray rows broke the monotonous aspect of the soil. All around the copse inclosed the clearing with its immovable masses, and at the bottom of the gorge a little pond was visible, whose smooth surface, surrounded by a border of rushes, reflected the delicate red and green tints of the twilight sky. Near the heaps the black silhouettes of the coal-burners were clearly outlined; and on the threshold of a turf-hut, near the verge of the forest, a coal-burner's wife cradled an infant on her knees, singing an old song, whose melodious strains filled the air with soothing music.

"It is beautiful here!" murmured Raymonde, looking upon the peaceful forest-landscape, faintly luminous, with which the singer's rustic refrain so well harmonized.

Antoine was talking with the foreman, seeking information concerning the route they must take to find the way home.

"You are in the old reserve," he replied; "within a gun-shot of the clearing you will come to a path leading to the Ronces forest, and from there to Vivey. I will send one of my workmen to show you the right road."

Before starting, however, Raymonde wanted to mend her dress, so that she might walk more comfortably. She went into the hut, took off her



skirt, borrowed a needle and thread of the coal-burner's wife, and found a seat on the trunk of a tree, close by a fire kindled in the open air. She made a charming picture as she sat there. She had taken off her hat, and her abundant hair, with its warm tints, falling in wavy curls over her shoulders, brought out the velvet whiteness of her complexion, while her brown eyes sparkled in the flickering twilight.

"See to what a forlorn condition that detestable thicket has brought me," she said to Antoine, who was kneeling down on the grass at her feet ; "my dress is entirely ruined ! "

"I never saw you so beautiful ! " he murmured, in a voice full of passionate emotion.

He was again spellbound under her fascinating power, and reproached himself for brutality in tormenting her with absurd questions. Raymonde's face beamed with satisfaction at this avowal, so full of deep and tender feeling, and she pursued her task with renewed energy.

The peasant-woman, seeing them deeply engaged in conversation, sat down near the hut, with her nursling in her arms, and recommenced her song.

"This place is pleasant," said Raymonde, biting off the thread with her small teeth, for she had finished mending her dress ; "we must come here again."

She went into the hut to put on her dress and



arrange her toilet. When she came out, she slipped a piece of silver into the little hand of the child as it lay asleep on its mother's lap, and then they set out on their way home under the guidance of an apprentice. They sent back their guide as soon as they reached the path leading through the Ronces forest, and made their way slowly under the tree-branches.

Night had come in earnest, and it was difficult to detect a trace of the path in the profound darkness that reigned in the woods. Occasionally, through the entangled branches, a star scintillated high up in the sky; sometimes a jay, dozing in the fork of a hazelnut-tree, started out of his sleep, and flew away uttering a shrill cry; then all was silent again.

They passed on without uttering a word, for they had enough to do in listening to the tender and absorbing thoughts that filled their breasts. A practised ear could have counted the pulsations of their hearts, they beat so violently. Raymonde instinctively drew near to Antoine, and, at a place where all trace of the path was lost in the darkness, he took her hand and held it firmly within his own. Thus they walked on for a few moments, when the girl, stumbling against a tree, was thrown back, and found herself suddenly clasped in Antoine's arms.

"Raymonde," said he, in a voice full of deep feeling, "I love you! Will you be my wife?"



She was so taken by surprise that she could not say a word, and remained for a moment without moving, resting against his breast.

"You do not reply," he continued ; "are you angry at my rash declaration ?"

"No," she whispered faintly ; "but I am suffocating—give me room to breathe !"

He released her, and of her own accord she placed her hands in his ; then she told him, in a plain, straightforward way, that she had loved him for a long time, ever since the first day she saw him.

"I am so happy," she whispered, "so proud that you have found out that I love you, and that you love me in return !"

Antoine pressed her again close to his heart, and the deep forest, full of silence and darkness, heard the light murmur of the kiss of betrothal.

She leaned on his arm, while they walked at a slow pace, telling everything to each other with the unrestrained confidence that follows violent nervous emotion. They soon reached the outskirts of the forest ; a gray light glimmered among the branches ; then the sky reappeared with its myriads of shining stars, and they were descending the hill leading to Vivey, the village lights sparkling at the bottom of the gorge.

"Walk slowly," murmured Antoine ; "it is so pleasant here ! Let me tell you once more



how much I love you. Are you afraid of being scolded?"

"I am afraid that my father will be alarmed; my mother will be angry, but I am used to her ill-humor, and it does not disturb me."

"I think she has taken a dislike to me, and will shut the door in my face when she learns that I wish to marry you."

"That is of no consequence; my father will be on our side. Besides, I have a will of my own, as my mother knows very well, and she will take care not to oppose me. But what will they say at your house, when they find out that you love me?"

"My father and mother will say that I am a happy fellow; and when they see you, they cannot help being charmed."

"And your old friend, M. Noël?"

"He will be harder to manage," replied Antoine, smiling; "but he will give in after a while."

Although walking very slowly, they came at last to the bottom of the hill, with the linden avenue leading to the Maison Verte directly in front of them.

"A year since," he continued, "I was in no condition to ask you to share my fortunes; my future was too uncertain. Now, without being rich, I can offer my wife an honorable position. You will see, Raymonde, we shall be happy! Is



it best for me to speak to your father this evening ? ”

“ No,” she replied, hastily ; “ leave me to manage the matter and choose the favorable moment.”

Osmin’s image, lost sight of entirely for more than an hour, suddenly loomed up in her memory. She was greatly troubled as to what would be the best way of breaking off her relations with him ; while his approaching return, with the long train of painful recriminations and disagreeable explanations, made her tremble with fear and lessened her confidence in the result of Antoine’s suit. Every tree in the avenue seemed to her like the menacing phantom of her colossal lover. Was it indeed a phantom, or was she the sport of an hallucination produced by the shadowy light faintly penetrating beneath the archway of trees ? A strange form suddenly detached itself from a linden and advanced toward them. At the same time, Raymonde heard a stentorian voice resounding in her ears, like the trumpet of the day of judgment ; it was the voice of Osmin de Préfontaine, who exclaimed :

“ It is you at last, Mlle. Raymonde ! Plague take the *rapport* ! You have frightened us half to death, and we thought you were lost at the bottom of a quagmire ! ”

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## IX.

RAYMONDE was so taken by surprise at Osmin's unexpected appearance that she could not utter a word in reply. Antoine, ignorant of the meaning of what was going on, felt her arm trembling within his own. A moment of embarrassing silence succeeded, during which the only sound that broke the stillness was the rustle of the heavy wings of the moths against the foliage of the lindens.

"Do you take me for a ghost?" exclaimed Préfontaine. "Don't be uneasy, it is really I myself in flesh and blood."

"Ah! it is you," she replied at last, without knowing what she was saying; "it is you—already!"

Her head became dizzy, and without the support of Antoine's arm she would have fallen.

"You did not expect me so soon, and are much surprised at my arrival?" continued Osmin, too much excited himself to notice the cool reception of his *fiancée*.

They walked on a few steps without speaking. After they left the avenue, Raymonde saw the two men curiously regarding each other by the uncertain light of the stars.

"It is M. Verdier without doubt," said the gi-



ant, bowing. "Mlle. Raymonde, present me to your friend, or shall I present myself?"

She made a great effort to recover her self-control, and, turning to Antoine, without daring to look at him, she stammered :

"It is M. Osmin de Préfontaine, of whom we were speaking just now."

"Delighted to see you, monsieur!" cried Osmin, holding out his huge hand to Antoine. "I have known your father for a long time, and we have killed more than one wolf in company."

"I must change my dress," said Raymonde to Antoine, "and I leave you to tell my father the reason why we were unable to rejoin him."

She left them in the hall, and was hurrying up-stairs to her chamber when Osmin called out :

"Are you running away for fear of being scolded? Don't be troubled, we will plead your cause. Allow me to follow you, M. Verdier." Entering the drawing-room, and finding M. and Mme. La Tremblaie much agitated, he continued : "I have brought back the wanderer. Nothing very bad has happened, and M. Verdier will tell you everything in a few words."

Antoine explained as well as he could the incidents of the evening. Mme. Clotilde was much annoyed, but managed to conceal her dissatisfaction. Osmin's return inclined her to indulgence, and she contented herself with throwing the whole blame upon her husband, saying that a little



more decision on his part would have prevented the unfortunate adventure. M. La Tremblaie, relieved from anxiety, and happy in getting off so cheaply, bent his back to the burden with his usual resignation. Fortunately for all parties, dinner was announced, Raymonde making her appearance as they were going to the dining-room.

She was very pale, and her eyes had a feverish brightness. They took their seats at the table, and hardly a word was spoken while they were partaking of the soup. Préfontaine, who had an enormous appetite, ate heartily, drank in the same proportion, and told stories of his hunting exploits, interspersing the narrative with noisy exclamations. Mme. Clotilde, with her radiant face, encouraging glances, and smiling lips, took a malicious pleasure in drawing him out. She had not been so agreeable for a long time, and her affability even extended to Antoine, whom she pretended to treat with distinguished consideration. He, however, was ill at ease ; the three wrinkles on his forehead were drawn close together, and gave a severe expression to his face. His penetrating eye was fixed alternately on Raymonde, who seemed lost in a dream, her head obstinately bent over her plate, and Préfontaine, who was in fine spirits from the combined influence of the happiness of coming back and the burgundy of his host. Osmin related a hunting story in the most boisterous



fashion ; he could not think of the right words, and laughed beforehand at his own jokes. Antoine felt a little more confident of success, as he recognized the dull brain and commonplace gayety of the last of the Préfontaines. It appeared impossible that this stupid cub could ever have made an impression on Raymonde's fancy ; and yet there was something perplexing and incomprehensible in her behavior in the presence of the new-comer.

"M. Verdier," said La Tremblaie, turning to his guest, "while I was waiting on the forest road, I found some plants that I wish to show you."

He then commenced a scientific discussion with Antoine that made Osmin open his round eyes. Like all persons of little cultivation, he had a disdain mingled with terror for science and scientific men. Although possessing a temperament little inclined to jealousy, he could not get over his astonishment at finding young Verdier installed on such intimate terms in the family. Raymonde indeed seemed too full of fun, too impatient of anything tedious, to fall in love with a *savant*. And yet this grave and reserved professor, who enameled his conversation with Latin words, aroused his distrust. "I must open my eyes," he thought. "By-and-by I will make the fellow talk, and see the bottom of the affair."

After dinner Raymonde was in the library for a minute, alone with Antoine.

"Go to-morrow morning to the coal-burner's



house at the old reserve," she whispered. "I shall be there. I have something to tell you."

Conversation languished in the drawing-room. Every one was tired except Préfontaine. In a few minutes Antoine rose to take leave, and Osmin, who had come from Lamargelle on foot, left the house at the same time. When they were out-of-doors, he lighted his pipe, looked at the sky, and, taking his companion's arm, said :

"How the stars shine, and what a beautiful night it is ! I have no desire to go to bed. How do you feel, M. Verdier ?"

"For the moment, I feel as you do ; but when you are at Lamargelle, and I at Auberive, I think we shall contemplate the heaven of our beds more willingly than the stars."

"Ha ! ha ! that is well said !" exclaimed Osmin, while his tremendous outburst of laughter was repeated by the echo of the forest. "You are a good fellow, and if you are willing we will strike a bargain. Instead of taking the Charbonnière woods, you can go back through La Treüe, and I will cross the plain so as to go along with you. Does that suit you ? Then it is done !"

Antoine could not refuse the cordial offer without being rude. Besides, seeing Osmin in such a communicative mood, he proposed to draw him out and learn how he was situated in regard to Raymonde. They climbed together the hill that leads to the plateau. Préfontaine smoked with



great whiffs, hummed a tune, and pressed Antoine's arm tenderly. He was never melancholy after drinking, and a good dinner, moistened with generous wine, disposed him to universal benevolence.

"La Tremblaie is a worthy man," he said; "his taste in wines is not to be despised. Don't talk to me of bordeaux; it is a wine that is bad for the blood. Long live burgundy, which fills the veins with sunshine! Excellent cellar, La Tremblaie's! Good house; everything is perfect there—the table and the people!"

He was silent for a moment. A bright vision of Raymonde passed through his brain, and reminded him of his intention to bring his companion to confession. Abruptly changing his theme, he inquired:

"How do you like her?"

"Like whom?"

"Why, Mlle. Raymonde, of course."

"She is a true woman," replied Antoine, becoming serious—"perfectly frank, natural, and charming."

"That is so!" exclaimed Osmin, delighted, and forgetting entirely his *rôle* of examining magistrate. "But there are prudish people here who think her badly brought up, because she rides alone on horseback, and does not tell everything she knows to the whole world! As far as I am concerned, I like her far better than the



devotees, who go about with their eyes cast down, and open their lips only to mumble their prayers. You have used the right word ; she is a true woman, and I hope she will be a true wife."

They had arrived at the great plain extending between Vivey and Lamargelle, and, walking on, passed the outskirts of the same woods where, a few hours before, Antoine and Raymonde had confessed their love. The young man felt a cold chill running through his veins at the remembrance of this hour of enchantment. He raised his eyes to the stars shining high in the sky above him, the same stars that had witnessed his first kiss on the young girl's brow ; then he drew in a long breath of the fresh evening air, and replied :

"Yes, the husband she chooses will be a happy man."

"He is already chosen !" said Osmin, with a loud laugh.

Antoine trembled. "What do you mean ?" he cried, his eyes fixed on Préfontaine, whose arm he had relinquished.

"Indeed, you would never imagine," answered his companion, good-naturedly. "Her parents were discreet, and that was right ; but matters have gone so far now that I may venture to speak. I am the happy man."

The young professor shivered from head to



foot with intense nervous emotion. Was he in a dream or was he awake ?

“Have you just asked the hand of Mlle. La Tremblaie ?” he said, in a low tone.

“No, I did not wait till this evening. I made my proposal two months ago.”

“Does Mlle. Raymonde know this ?”

“Certainly. I paid my addresses to Raymonde as soon as I had received her mother’s consent. It is better to confess to God than to the saints. I have had trouble enough, however. She hesitated, advanced one step, and went back two ; for it takes these young girls a long time to make up their minds to say yes. I waited patiently, and kept up my courage, until at last I succeeded in taming the little wild partridge. We have been betrothed ever since Assumption-day in August.”

“It was you, then, who gave her the bracelet with the motto ?”

“You noticed it ? Then she still wears it ? So much the better !” exclaimed Osmin, triumphantly. “Everything goes on swimmingly, for I talked with her mother to-day. In a week the bans will be published, and in a fortnight the marriage will take place. You will be there ; you are a gallant youth, and I must secure your services as groomsman. We shall have a jolly time, you may be sure !”

“Farewell !” said Antoine, almost distract-



ed, as he dashed into a path leading into the woods.

“Where are you going?” cried Osmin, full of amazement. “We have not yet reached La Treüe; you have made a mistake, comrade. Here! Come back!” he shouted.

But Antoine, letting him shout till he was out of breath, made his way through the copse with the utmost speed. He had not the slightest idea where he was, nor where he was going. He walked straight ahead, sometimes in the midst of the thicket, sometimes through the wet glades, his feet sinking into the spongy soil at every step. At times he thought he must be intoxicated. The trees whirled around; the earth slipped from under his feet; the sky itself, studded with myriads of stars, seemed to totter; Préfontaine’s boisterous laugh rang continually in his ears. In the midst of this imaginary whirl of surrounding objects, his brain appeared to be paralyzed, and his ideas became torpid. One single thought from time to time aroused his slumbering faculties, and brought with it acute suffering. “She lied!” he said to himself—“she lied!”

Pursuing thus his wild course through the woods, he stumbled suddenly against a stump, and fell down. The freshness of the moist grass, calming for a moment the fever in his blood, helped him to recover his self-possession and re-



member where he was. He found himself on a hill-side not far from the main road, and near a cross-road where a house was plainly visible, the windows being still lighted. He recognized the dwelling of the forester of Val-Clavin, who had doubtless finished his tour of inspection and was eating his supper in the kitchen. The blaze of the fire on the hearth was easily distinguished through the windows, and the voices of children were wafted to his ears through the evening air.

Antoine, his forehead resting on his hands, collected his ideas by degrees, and thought how little time it had required to change his paradise into a hell of despair. The more he reflected, the more odious Raymonde's conduct appeared to him. She had basely deceived him, and played her cards at the same time for him and Préfontaine. What he had taken for unaffected simplicity was only a refinement of coquetry. Everything was over; there was nothing for him to do but tear this miserable love from his heart, and he resolved to commence the painful operation immediately. He arose from his seat, crossed the road, and knocked at the forester's door, who uttered an exclamation of surprise upon recognizing him. Undisturbed at the curiosity of the forester's wife or the frightened looks of the children, he asked for writing materials, and, tracing some lines on a sheet of yellow paper torn out of an old register, folded the letter, and inclosed it in a



rough envelope hastily made for the occasion. Murmuring a few words of excuse and thanks to his hosts, who thought him insane, he went out and plunged once more into the midst of the woods.

The autumnal night, loaded with freshness and vapor, still hovered for many long hours over the massive foliage, the deserted paths, and the marshy glades of the forest. At last morning dawned in the east, rose-colored clouds appeared on the pearl-gray sky, the red foliage of the beech-trees laden with nuts shivered, and the cocks began to crow in the yards of Vivey.

The sound of the monotonous flail was heard under the porch of a barn. The miller opened the sluices, and the water was thrown upon the wheel, turning it slowly with a scattering of little white drops. The nine strokes of the Angelus rang out from the pointed belfry of the little church. A flock of ducks descended gravely with a wabbling motion to the stream, and suddenly, with joyful cries, they all plunged into the water, which was thrown round in all directions under the shock of their wings and webbed feet. Then the sun, shining through the trees, completed the waking up of the village. A gardener passed back and forth before the windows of the Maison Verte, raking the gravel in the paths. The window-blinds of Raymonde's room were thrown back, letting in the bright sunshine in full force. She was up and dressed, having slept little during



the night. Her eyes had dark circles around them, and her face was pale and anxious. Everyone else in the house was asleep, and, improving the opportunity, she descended lightly to the stable, ordered Jannie to be saddled, and, springing upon his back, started off in the direction of the old reserve.

She longed to reach the coal-burners' place, and hoped to find Antoine there. Her conscience was by no means at rest. Although she thought it would be comparatively easy to get rid of Préfontaine, she very much feared Antoine's resentment of her want of frankness. He had expressed so many times his horror of dissimulation. She reproached herself bitterly for not having yielded to his entreaties the previous evening. Why had she not told him everything when he was so anxious to listen to her? At least, she would wait no no longer, and that very morning she would confess her folly without the least reserve. She would explain the reasons why the conditional promise extorted from her by Osmin had never appeared to her of serious importance; and he would believe her, for she would lay open her whole heart before him. She loved him so much that she could not fail to convince him of her sincerity. Her affection for him absorbed her entire being; and now that she knew it was reciprocated, the idea of losing him made an icy chill run through her veins.



On reaching the old reserve, she saw through the morning mist the smoke of the kilns in the midst of the clearing. The coal-burner's wife had hung the pot over the fire burning near the entrance of the hut; the master and the apprentices went back and forth around the furnaces, and the woodmen's axes resounded in the distance.

Raymonde alighted, fastened Jannie to a tree, and, with a palpitating heart, made her way through the young growth of wood, looking everywhere for Antoine. Coming to an open kiln from which they were taking the charcoal, she asked the foreman if he had seen the young man who was with her the evening before.

"Yes, indeed, I have!" replied the master, laying down his rake; "he came here before sunrise, and left me something in writing to give you." He put his hand into the pocket of his waistcoat, and held out to Raymonde a letter black with charcoal dust.

She took it with a trembling hand, and then seated herself on a pile of fagots, turning her back to the coal-burners to conceal her agitation. She had a presentiment of trouble, and for some time was unable to decipher a word. At last she read these brief lines scrawled upon the yellow paper:

"Préfontaine has told me everything. Thus, at the very moment when I opened my heart to you, you deceived me! You lied—you!—you whom I loved so much! I will never see you



again, and I will forget everything like a bad dream. Adieu !”

Her heart received a violent shock, her lips became pale, her limbs grew stiff, and her head fell heavily against the fagots.

“O master !” cried an apprentice who had been watching her slyly behind a tree, “come quick—the young lady has fainted !”

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## X.

“WHAT a condition you are in, my poor boy ! Where do you come from ? What has happened to you ?”

These questions burst forth one after the other from Sœurette’s lips as Antoine entered the kitchen about nine o’clock in the morning. His feet were covered with mud, his clothes were in great disorder, and he had the wan countenance and heavy eyes of a man who has passed a sleepless night. Verdier, busy with his writing at one end of the table, dropped his spectacles in amazement, and, biting his moustache, repeated in his turn :

“Where have you been, Antoine ? How pale you are !”

“I slept in the open air,” replied Antoine, laconically, “and I slept badly. That is all.”

“I will make you some buttered toast !” cried Sœurette.



"Thank you, mother, but I do not want anything."

He went to the pump, filled the brass basin with water, drank two or three swallows, and then, turning to the good woman who watched him anxiously, said in a tone of assumed calmness: "Mother, I shall set out for Paris to-morrow; will you get my trunk ready?"

The crash of the ancient forest of Auberive falling suddenly into the river would not have produced a more profound astonishment than the announcement of this departure. Verdier could not believe his ears; the dish that Sœurette was wiping slipped from her hands and was smashed to pieces on the paved floor.

"What! going away?" she stammered, sitting down and trying to collect her thoughts. "You must be in fun! Your leave of absence lasts till the 15th of November."

"I have received a counter-order," he replied, not daring to look his mother in the face. "I must go back to-morrow, or I shall lose my place."

Sœurette did not say another word. Leaning her head on her hands and her elbows on the table, she began to weep very quietly. Verdier got up with an appearance of vexation, and scratched his head violently.

"There! see how she is weeping already!" he murmured, casting a timid glance toward Antoine. "Was there ever such an unreasonable



woman? Since the dear child is going away before the end of his vacation, you can understand that he is obliged to do so. He loves us too well to grieve us if he can help it. He knows very well that we have no one but him, that a month is a short time after seven years of absence, and that it will be hard for us when we are again alone in the house. He knows all this better than we do!"

Verdier paused between each sentence, and looked at his son with an air of entreaty, so that his words seemed to be addressed to Antoine rather than Sœurette. The young man remained motionless, his arms crossed, his eyes fixed, and his teeth clinched.

"In short, what can you do?" continued the forester. "If the minister recalls him, he must go. I believe in discipline. Passive obedience is my doctrine! All the same, M. Noël will be much surprised as well as disappointed!"

"I am going there this evening to explain my reasons," interrupted Antoine, "and he will approve of my decision."

He was afraid of being moved by their entreaties, and, leaving the kitchen abruptly, went to his chamber.

Sœurette, hearing him go away, covered her face with her apron, and sobbed as if her heart were breaking.

"Why do you cry," said Verdier, "when it is



plain that he is determined to leave us? See what it is to have children! They are like birds; as soon as they get their feathers, they think of nothing but quitting the nest!"

He was trying all the time he was talking to buckle his gaiters. Did his fingers tremble, or was the trouble in his eyes? He could not make the tongue of the buckle catch in the holes of the leather strap. He went out at last swearing in a suppressed voice, and directed his steps to Le Chânois to tell everything to M. Noël. He hoped the old man would use his influence to induce Antoine to stay at home; but, contrary to his expectation, M. Noël upheld his pupil's course, declaring that his departure was the act of a sensible man, and that Verdier himself was the only fool in the whole affair. Thereupon he turned his back to him and shut himself up in his library.

Toward evening Sœurette went to Antoine's room to pack his trunk. The young man was standing at the window, watching the forest and the tree-tops undulating in the west wind with a sound like the sea. Sœurette had drawn the empty trunk into the middle of the chamber.

"And so it is decided," she ventured to remark in a timid voice; "you are determined to leave us, my dear son?"

"Yes, mother, it must be," he replied, without turning round, as if he did not dare to face the anxious glance that he felt was fixed upon him.



Sœurette shook her head ; then she searched the cupboards, emptied the drawers, and began to arrange the things in the trunk, now and then wiping away a tear that would persist in rolling down her cheek. When she felt more calm and thought her voice would not be stifled by a sob, she hazarded a suggestion :

“ You see,” she said, “ I have arranged everything in dozens ; you will have nothing to do but take out your clothes and put them in your closet. I beg you, especially, to place the shirts that come from the wash at the bottom of the pile, or else you will always wear the same ones. Nothing uses up linen like these everlasting washings. I would have given you two or three jars of my plum preserves to carry back, but they are not ready. Ah ! if you could only stay till the end of the week ! ”

Antoine, without replying, sat down at his desk and packed his books. Sœurette, while folding the garments, slyly watched the contracted face of the son she was so soon to lose. She observed him in profile, his brow bent toward the desk, and his eyelids cast down. She saw his lips quiver as if struggling to keep back a sob, and she could restrain herself no longer. Letting the package of clothes fall from her hands, she rushed to Antoine, threw her arms around him, and devoured him with kisses.

“ You are unhappy,” she exclaimed, “ and are



trying to force back your tears. Why do you act in this mysterious way? Why do you want to go away? Do you think I shall oppose your marriage with the young lady at the Maison Verte? You know very well that whatever pleases you pleases me. If she suits your fancy, bring her home, and we will love her. But don't go away—don't go away so soon!”

“It is useless to try to keep me, my good mother,” said Antoine, embracing her. “Believe me, I must go. Do not even ask me the reason. One of these days I will explain everything.”

The gentleness and decision of his words indicated a resolution so unalterable that Sœurette ceased her opposition; but, as her eyes were again bathed in tears, she leaned against the window-bar to conceal her emotion. It was growing dark, the sky was covered with heavy, low-lying clouds, and the wind was constantly increasing. It ran along the borders of the forest, shook the branches rudely, and detached the yellow leaves. Sœurette saw, through her tears, this rain of dead leaves falling down on the back of the hill. Every gust swept away clouds of them, whirling them round, gathering them in heaps in the hollows of the ditches, or scattering them on the close-cut grass of the meadows. This disorderly and melancholy flight was also a symbol of departure, for it announced the close of the season and the disappearance of the bright autumnal days. Sœurette



thought, with a breaking heart, of the long winter evenings she would pass alone over the dying embers, while the son so dearly loved was exposed to all the dangers of Paris.

Poor mothers, how many hours of anguish the hard necessities of their lives have stored up for them ! When they were young they said to themselves, "If I were only married to a man who loved me !" The husband came, often manifesting little affection, sometimes rude or indifferent. Then they wish for a child as a consolation. The child is born, and new trials come with it. "He will repay me for all my trouble when he grows," they think in the midst of their sorrows. The son grows up, and, when he is twenty years old, goes far away, and the mother remains alone with redoubled anxiety. The child belongs to her no longer ; it is she who belongs to the child, for he holds her heart by a chain that is constantly lengthening, and becoming heavier in the same proportion.

Such was the train of thought passing vaguely through Sœurette's mind, while the leaves were flying about in all directions, already far away from the forest. Sometimes the wind seized them in a heap, rolled them round, and tossed them wildly over the fields ; sometimes it rocked them gently one by one, making them hover like butterflies in the gray evening air. A violent gust passed suddenly over the garden, brought in one



breath a quantity of plane-tree leaves, and threw them into the chamber. One of them, a large leaf, much torn by the wind, but still green, fell upon the clothing. Sœurette, who had watched its course, hurried to the trunk, and, shutting the cover, carefully imprisoned this leaf that the old garden seemed to send as a relic to the child who was going to leave her. Then she sat down on the trunk and remained perfectly quiet. The darkness increased, and soon nothing could be distinguished in the silent chamber but Antoine's shadowy outline, and two luminous points marking his mother's tear-stained eyes.

While the little house at Auberive was given up to disappointment and desolation, matters were going on still more sadly at the Maison Verte. Raymonde had returned in despair. Her fainting turn at the coal-burner's had not lasted long. A few drops of water thrown upon her face had quickly brought her to her senses, and, without heeding the entreaties of the coal-burner's wife, she had mounted Jannie and ridden away at a rapid pace through the clearing. She held tightly in her hand the note in which Antoine had judged her without mercy, and her whole soul revolted against the severity of the sentence. She would not believe that everything was irrevocably ended between them; her passionate and enduring love protested against it. She longed to see Osmin and break off forever all connection with



him. Afterward she would throw herself at the feet of Antoine's mother and beg her to intercede with her son in her behalf. No obstacles would prevent the accomplishment of her purpose.

She urged on Jannie at the top of his speed, and the little horse, stimulated by the whip, galloped furiously through the narrow paths of the Ronces woods. The branches, lightly touched by Raymonde's skirt, rebounded against Jannie, and urged on still more his raging course. The trees on both sides of the road seemed to fly in the greatest confusion under the gray sky. Raymonde experienced a kind of relief in this wild ride, for its fury harmonized with the ungovernable thoughts that whirled through her brain.

When the equestrienne and her horse arrived in full speed before the Maison Verte, Jannie could hardly stand and Raymonde was utterly exhausted. She felt incapable of speaking a word, and, in order to escape questions and explanations, went to her chamber and locked herself in.

Then only, in the solitude of her own room, where even at noonday the brown tint of the oak wainscoting threw a melancholy shade over the furniture, did she realize the whole extent of the disaster. Thus far external scenes and the excitement of her furious race had divided her attention; now a frightful calm and isolation reigned around her. The tall mirror reflected her pale cheeks and hollow eyes; the shepherd on the



panel seemed to play on his flute the funereal chant of lost loves. The wind whistling in the old chimney sighed and moaned with a heart-breaking sadness. Raymonde never in her whole life felt so entirely alone, so hopelessly desolate.

While she was taking off the skirt of her riding-dress, a servant knocked at the door to tell her they were waiting breakfast for her. She sent back a message, begging to be excused. The servant went away, and perfect silence once more filled the apartment. Raymonde, kneeling in front of her bed, hid her face in the bedclothes and wept undisturbed. The undulating outline of her back and lower limbs, and the golden mass of her red hair, brought out with marvelous brilliancy by the white drapery, were alone visible. The tears, held back the whole morning, burst forth without restraint. She wept like a child which feels its first great sorrow, and abandons itself to grief with wild violence. She went on in this way for a long time, when a step was again heard on the floor of the corridor—a step short, decided, and impatient, betraying the imperious character of the person who approached.

“Raymonde!” called Mme. Clotilde from without.

There was no answer but a spiteful movement of the shoulders and a more desperate plunge of the head in the bedclothes.

“Raymonde!” repeated the lady in a harsher



tone, "open the door! I know you are there. Let us have no more of this child's play!"

The mass of red hair moved for a moment, a glimpse of the profile was seen, and the girl murmured in a sullen voice, "I have the headache!"

"What affectation! Your headache did not prevent you from riding about the country this morning. Come down; M. de Préfontaine is there."

"Indeed!"

She sprang to her feet with a bound. Her sharp and swollen eyes shone with a ferocious brilliancy, and her haughty lips had an angry and defiant expression.

"Come, make haste; he wishes to speak to you."

"That is well; I will come down!" she replied in a determined tone.

She bathed her face in fresh water, finished her toilet in a summary fashion, and descended or rather bounded down the stairway.

When she opened the door of the drawing-room, Mme. Clotilde had resumed her place on the sofa, where Osmin, already seated, crossed and uncrossed his legs with an appearance of great uneasiness. M. La Tremblaie, seated in his easy-chair, watched with a sleepy eye the efforts made by the giant to draw down his black trousers, much too short, over his great seven-league boots.



"Ah!" said Préfontaine, holding out his hand to Raymonde, "good morning, mademoiselle. Were you really ill? One would never think so, to see your rosy cheeks! I hope you are better."

"Yes, thank you!" she replied, barely touching the colossal hand with her icy fingers.

She went and leaned against her father's chair, as if there alone she hoped to find help and protection in the coming combat.

"Mlle. Raymonde," continued Préfontaine, after having coughed to clear his voice, "we were speaking of you. I was telling Mme. La Tremblaie that the repairs at Lamargelle are finished. The workmen have left, and I hope that you will come soon to see if everything suits you. Now that the nest is ready," he added, timidly, "I hope you will consent to fix the day for the marriage."

"M. de Préfontaine," answered Raymonde, in a very resolute voice, though slightly trembling, "I do not wish to deceive you any longer in regard to my intentions. I shall never live at Lamargelle."

"What!" exclaimed Osmin, not understanding her meaning, "do you mean to say that you wish to remain at the Maison Verte after we are married? I know very well that it is painful for a girl to leave her parents, but think that Lamargelle is hardly an hour's ride from Vivey."

"That is not the point in question," retorted Raymonde, looking him full in the face. "Vivey



and Lamargelle are indifferent to me. I do not wish to be married."

M. La Tremblaie raised his head in amazement, and Mme. Clotilde started from her seat, shrugging her shoulders. She was going to speak, but Préfontaine made a sign to her to keep silent, and then went on, with a look of consternation :

"Heavens ! Mlle. Raymonde, I remember very well that you did not give me a positive answer when I asked you to become my wife ; on my side, I promised to be patient, and not urge my suit. However, it seemed to me since—certain circumstances made me suppose—in short, when I set out for the Morvan, I thought you had decided to accept me, and we should be married when I returned."

"You are mistaken," she said, curtly, "and if my language or conduct has deceived you, I beg your pardon."

"At least," sighed the giant, with a sad and dejected countenance, "if you are not disposed to listen to me to-day, let me hope that at some future time—"

"Neither to-day nor at any future time," she interrupted him. "Renounce me : I shall not marry."

M. La Tremblaie moved restlessly in his chair, and turned half round to look at his daughter with a kind of respectful awe. The energetic



manifestation of will always made a strong impression upon him.

"When will this affectation come to an end?" exclaimed Mme. Clotilde, bursting with rage, and unable to restrain herself any longer. "How long have little girls dared to thwart the wishes of their parents? M. de Préfontaine has our promise; this marriage is decided; it will take place."

"It will not take place," replied Raymonde, becoming very pale, and advancing a few steps toward her mother; "it will not take place—I will answer for that!"

"Raymonde," murmured La Tremblaie, in a tone of entreaty mingled with fear.

"Let her alone; I know how to bring her to her senses!" said Mme. Clotilde. "She may choose between M. de Préfontaine and a convent, and we shall see if she does not sing another song when she is shut up within its walls."

Poor Osmin, entirely unprepared for such an explosion, opened his eyes in consternation. Raymonde, standing in front of her mother, looked directly in her face, and tossed up her chin with an air of revolt and bravado.

"But, my dear," La Tremblaie ventured to say, humiliated by the passive *rôle* he played in the affair, "if Raymonde, knowing our wishes, has such an aversion to marriage, I have no desire to do violence to her inclination."

"This is marvelous!" interrupted the lady,



stimulated by opposition. "Uphold her, obey her caprices !"

"Not her caprices ; but if she has serious reasons—"

"Let her avow these reasons !" retorted Mme. Clotilde, casting a defiant glance upon her daughter, who remained unmoved. "She will take good care to keep them to herself, for she unites hypocrisy with disobedience. I will tell you what they are, since you are blind enough not to see them. She is in love with this M. Verdier, whom you had the imprudence to receive here—a vulgar pedant, coming from no one knows where, who ate your dinners and courted your daughter."

The warm blood mounted to Raymonde's cheeks, and her eyes flashed with indignation. With one bound she stood face to face with her mother, and, looking straight in her eyes, exclaimed :

"I will not allow M. Verdier to be slandered in my presence ; he is worth more than all of us put together !"

"You see," sneered Mme. Clotilde, beside herself with passion ; "she dares to boast of her lover !"

"Yes, I love him !" cried the girl, without even casting down her eyes.

"Bold creature !"

The merciless woman raised her hand ; in less time than it takes to tell the story, it fell on Ray-



monde's cheek, and the sharp sound of a blow resounded in the ears of the two men who were the astounded spectators of the scene.

"Clotilde !" stammered La Tremblaie.

Raymonde was white as marble, and her eyes had an expression fearful to behold.

"Mademoiselle !" exclaimed Osmin, throwing himself between the mother and the daughter. He dreaded some rash act on her part, and tried to seize her hands, which she twisted convulsively one within the other. "Mlle. Raymonde !"

"Let me alone !" she rejoined in a hoarse whisper.

She eluded his grasp, rushed to the door leading to the garden, threw it open as if life depended upon her escape, and disappeared.

She ran rapidly across the lawn, pushed open the gate, and reached the woods by the shortest path. She fled with all her might, as if afraid of being pursued. It was a wild race, like that of a deer chased by dogs. She crossed the thickets without caring for her dress torn in tatters by the thorns, nor for the darkness which was taking possession of the forest ; for the sky was overcast, and the twilight was rapidly giving place to the sombre shades of evening.

She longed to escape, to go far away from the house where she had been humiliated before a stranger. She felt on her cheek, like a burn, the mark of the blow given by her mother's hand,



and the memory of the unbearable insult brought tears of indignation to her eyes.

She sat down for a moment on the side of a path to take breath. The most desperate resolutions took possession of her mind. The determination to see Antoine once more and prove her innocence was the ruling idea. She must speak to him that very evening, whatever it cost. Should she knock as a suppliant at the door of that ferocious M. Noël, who detested her, but held a powerful influence over the heart of his former pupil? "If I can induce him to listen to me," she thought, "at least Antoine will not go away believing me deceitful and disloyal."

She had but one wish, to justify herself; the rest was of little importance. If she lost Antoine, the world would be a desert and life of no value. She would then find in a nook of the forest a pond deep enough to hide her forever. She was at an age when death seems easy, and she lived at a time when faith and hope were not strong enough to make the idea of suicide repugnant to the feelings.

She sat perfectly still, her forehead resting on her hands, while darkness took possession of the woods. Suddenly a sound of drops of water falling on the dry leaves wakened her from her reverie. She got up and went on her way. The great clouds, heaped together by the west wind, began to dissolve, and gusts of rain descended



upon the wooded hills. It was at first a refreshing murmur, timidly touching the movable roofing of the branches ; then the leaves bent down and allowed the cold tears of the shower to pass through in all directions. The gusts became more violent by degrees, the whole forest was penetrated, the rain fell in great sheets, and Raymonde felt it streaming down her neck. None the less courageously did she pursue her way over stony paths transformed into trenches. At last, at a turn of the track, the copse opened before her, and she saw at her feet, in the hollow of the valley, through the enshrouding veil of mist, the lights of Auberive twinkling in the darkness.

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## XI.

M. NOËL had just finished his supper. He had returned to the apartment that served him for a library, placed the lamp on his study-table, and leaning his head on the back of his leather easy-chair, and protecting his feet from dampness by the mild warmth of Vagabonde, he was reading Lucretius, his favorite poet. A narrow white circle over the pages of the book and a few flickering gleams above among the joists of the ceiling was all the light dispensed by the shaded lamp in the old study-room. The rest of the apartment was plunged into almost entire obscurity, through



which there were vague glimpses of wandering rays bending under the weight of old books and beams fringed with spiders' webs.

Three loud knocks on the door of the house, coming through the whistling of the wind and the beating of the rain against the windows, awoke Vagabonde, who started to her feet with a sharp bark.

"Ah!" said M. Noël, "it is Antoine; I know his way of knocking. Be quiet, Vagabonde—rightly named; you ought to be ashamed to show yourself after such misconduct."

Having thus vented his feelings upon his dog, he left his seat and went to the door. Antoine passed rapidly through the kitchen, and returned with the professor to the library. While he was taking off his dripping overcoat, M. Noël cleared a stool piled up with books to offer a seat to his pupil.

"What bad weather, Antoine!" said the old man, who marked the changed countenance of his visitor, but did not appear to notice it. "The north wind howled so loudly this evening, that I took refuge in this den. It is more home-like than that great barn of a kitchen."

"M. Noël," interrupted Antoine, "I have come to bid you farewell; I am going away to-morrow."

"I know it, my boy; your father told me, and I replied that you did right, and that, if you had



consulted me, I would have advised you to go away long before this. In certain cases it is more courageous to fly from danger than to encounter it."

Antoine buttoned and unbuttoned his surtout nervously, sighed profoundly, and remained silent.

"I know it is hard," continued M. Noël. "Do you think that it does not grieve me to see you go so soon—you, my sole interest in the world—when we have had scarcely any time to talk together? I promised myself much enjoyment in your three months' vacation; but your future welfare is dearer to me than anything else. Remember what I told you one evening in the Charbonnière wood!"

"You were right!" replied Antoine, bitterly.

He leaned his elbow on the table, and M. Noël could examine at leisure his contracted features, pale cheeks, and eyes full of tears. The constraint the young man imposed upon himself in endeavoring to conceal his feelings gave a more poignant expression to his countenance; and the good man, sympathizing in this mute grief, was moved with paternal pity.

"You are unhappy, my poor child," he said, drawing nearer to him. "Come, do not be under any restraint; tell me your troubles, if it will make you feel easier."

Antoine shook his head.



"Come, now, open your heart ; your lamentations will not fall upon an indifferent ear. I know everything that woman can invent to torture the simple-hearted fools that are caught in their snares. Tell me the whole story ! This deceitful girl has refused you ; she did not know her own mind ?"

"If it were only that, I could bear it better !" exclaimed Antoine ; "but no, she preferred to lie. The same words of tenderness that she addressed to me, the same vows that I received, had been already lavished upon another, and she deceived us both !"

"I know these faithless creatures too well !" growled M. Noël, striking the table with his fist. "They cannot send you to perdition in an honest way, but poison the arrow with a lie, so that the venom may remain longer in the wound."

"And yet," murmured the youth, "if ever a face breathed frankness and loyalty, it is hers. Never did clearer eyes seem to reflect more plainly the sincerity of an upright heart ; never did lips appear to express more spontaneously the sentiments of a loving nature."

"Sheer affectation ! They know how to lie to perfection ! But at the bottom they are all alike—cunning and perverse deceivers ! All the same, my boy, all the same !"

Antoine was too much absorbed by his sorrow to give heed to M. Noël's sarcastic sneers.



“Why did she make me think she loved me?” he continued, as if he were replying to himself; “why did she want to deceive me? It was so easy to say that she was already engaged.”

“Precisely; it was altogether too easy! Women are like cats, which delight in artful manœuvres, and never go straight to the point.”

“Stop!” cried the young man, seizing M. Noël’s arm; “not another word against her! I feel, in spite of everything, that I love her still, that I shall love her always. It may be that I have condemned her too quickly; that this fool of a Préfontaine is a vainglorious boaster, and that it is he who has spoken falsely.”

“Pshaw!” said the old man; “this is nothing but the delusion of a distempered self-love.”

“If, however, I were mistaken?” repeated Antoine, darting upon his old master an anxious glance that penetrated his heart.

“I am so sorry for you,” replied M. Noël—“so sorry that, if the girl were innocent, and had in reality half the affection for you that you still feel for her, notwithstanding my aversion to marriage, I would say to you, ‘Return to her and marry her, since you cannot live without her!’ But I venture to swear that she has sung to Préfontaine the same romance which she has warbled plaintively in your ears. Why should this fellow, who is a fool, I grant, but who has the reputation of being an honest man, let himself down to play



such a comedy? What proof have you against him that cannot be turned with equal force against her?"

Antoine's head fell hopelessly upon his hands. "You are right," he sighed, "but your reasoning chills my heart. I feel that something is dead within me that will never come to life; it is faith in the word of other human beings. I have a wound there that will bleed forever."

"Your wound will close, my poor boy!" replied M. Noël, who had risen and pressed his hands with great tenderness in his own.

Antoine shook his head.

"You will be cured," exclaimed the good man; "you are not made of a different clay from your fellow-men! Look at me. I suffered cruelly a long time ago, and from a more envenomed wound than yours. I had, like you, warm blood, a tender heart, and sensitive nerves. I have forgotten everything. It is the law of Nature; she gives us forgetfulness to quiet our pains, as she gives us sleep to rest our weary bodies. It throws by degrees its delicate cobwebs over our wounds, and some day the blood flows no longer, the wound is cicatrized. We ask ourselves in amazement, 'What has become of my jealousy? where is my anger? where is my malice?' There is nothing left; forgetfulness has hushed everything to sleep."

There was a moment of silence. The rain



beat furiously against the window-panes, and the wind moaned in the stairway. Between the gusts of the storm a hurried knocking on the door startled the quiet inmates of the room.

"Some one is knocking !" said Antoine, listening.

"Nonsense ! it is nothing but the wind shaking the shutters."

A renewed knocking, louder than the former, was distinctly heard reverberating through the sonorous walls of the kitchen, and Vagabonde, starting up, began to bark furiously.

"I am sure some one is rapping at the door !" continued the young man, rising from his seat.

"Doubtless some tramp who takes my house for a tavern !" grumbled M. Noël, lighting his lantern. "Be easy ; I will find out who it is."

He left Antoine with Vagabonde, and descended carefully the little stairway leading to the kitchen.

"Who is there ?" he called out before drawing the bolt.

There was no answer ; or at least if there was one, it was blended with the sighing of the wind. M. Noël, growing impatient, unbolted the door. It was thrown wide open by the violence of the wind, which at the same time pushed forward into the kitchen a woman whose clothes were streaming with rain. The professor, raising his lantern, recognized Raymonde.



An idea crossed his brain and increased his ill-humor.

"She knows that Antoine is at Le Chânois," he thought, "and she has the audacity to come after him."

"The person you seek is not here !" he cried, thrusting back the young girl ; "go on your way !"

"I seek no one but you, M. Noël. You are the person to whom I want to speak."

"What have you to say to me ?" he replied, in the same surly tone, still persisting in preventing her entrance. "Speak, then ; I am listening."

"Will you leave me out-doors in such weather as this ?" replied Raymonde, in a voice of such utter sadness that the old man began to feel ashamed of his rudeness.

He raised his lantern once more, and looked upon the pretty face beaten by the wind and the rain. The girl shivered with cold, her wet dress clung closely to her limbs, and her hair, scarcely protected by a fichu tied over it, was in the greatest disorder. M. Noël retreated slowly, and allowed the importunate visitor to cross the threshold of Le Chânois.

"Indeed," he murmured, "she is soaked through as if she had just come out of the river. Her teeth chatter with cold. Come in, then, since you are here. But, above all things, let us have



no outcries ; I have a horror of affectation ! Enter and shut the door."

All this time Vagabonde was throwing herself round like one beside herself. The old man, still grumbling, seized a fagot of twigs from a corner of the kitchen and threw it on the andirons. He lighted it, and in a twinkling a bright flame crackled in the fireplace.

"See how the fire clears up everything," he said, without looking at Raymonde. "One must be possessed of the devil to run about the country in this wild wind ! But nothing in this world will prevent a woman from acting like a fool." He pushed a seat in front of the hearthstone. "Sit down and dry yourself !"

"Thanks !" she murmured.

He shrugged his shoulders with a spiteful gesture.

"You need not thank me ; I am acting from constraint and necessity. Will that cursed dog never be silent ? Wait, I will come back again."

He half opened the door leading to the stairway, and groped his way to the library, where Antoine was walking round in a restless mood.

"It is nothing," stammered the professor, out of breath ; "it is the farmer's wife who has brought the weekly supplies. Don't be impatient !"

"I will go down with you," said the young



man, perplexed by M. Noël's mysterious proceedings.

"How shall I manage?" thought the good man, not knowing what excuse to make; "it will never do for them to meet."

"No, no," he exclaimed, "you will be in my way; and besides, I have something more to say to you."

He opened a closet, took out a bottle covered with dust, which he concealed under his coat, and then, giving a rebuff to Vagabonde, who wanted to follow him, slipped away, while Antoine watched his movements with a suspicious eye.

When he returned to the kitchen, Raymonde, her elbows resting on her knees and her head on her hands, seemed to be absorbed in gazing at the flames. She had untied the fichu that served for a covering to her head; her disordered hair, bathed in the golden fire-light, formed an aureole around her head; and her smoking garments showed the influence of the increasing warmth. M. Noël took a glass from the kneading-trough, half filled it with the old wine he had brought, and held it out to the girl.

"Here," he said in the same surly tone, "drink this to warm your blood."

She raised the glass to her lips and drank one swallow, while the old man threw a fresh fagot on the fire.



"Tell me your story," he went on, "and be brief ; I have no time to waste."

He continued to walk rapidly around the room with a nervous step. A cricket, roused by the warmth of the fire, uttered a faint cry behind the linen-drier. Raymonde, disheartened by her host's uncivil bearing, tried to speak, but her trembling lips refused utterance to her words.

"Did you imagine that Antoine was at Le Chânois ? Be frank !" he said angrily.

"No," she replied. "It is true I set out intending to have a talk with him ; but when I reached his house and saw the light in the windows, I did not dare to enter. Then I thought of you, and the idea of knocking at your door came into my head."

"Humph ! Singular idea ! And why did you think of me, pray tell ?"

"Because I know Antoine loves and respects you like a father. If I can convince you of my innocence, you will tell him, and he will believe you."

"What do you know about me ?" he growled, his anger slightly appeased in spite of himself. "Do you suppose that I am so easily cajoled with flattering words ? I am not the person to be seduced by sentimental comedies and falsehoods wrapped up in female blandishments !"

"I am not false !" cried Raymonde ; "I always say what I think."



"Do not scream so loud," replied M. Noël rudely, trembling lest Antoine should recognize Raymonde's voice.

"I have never played a comedy!" she repeated, looking him straight in the eyes.

"Not even with Antoine?"

"How was that possible? I loved him."

"And with M. de Préfontaine?"

"Not even with M. Préfontaine."

She stopped, thinking she heard the sound of a footstep and a sigh behind a partition; but it was doubtless an hallucination of her ears, still ringing with the streaming of the rain and the noise of the wind. Nothing disturbed the silence that prevailed, except the regular chirp of the cricket and the sound of the old man's footsteps as he walked rapidly back and forth in the kitchen.

"Is that all?" he asked, stopping suddenly in front of Raymonde.

"No," she replied in a tone full of entreaty; "be patient with me. Antoine has often told me that your rough manner concealed a good heart. Show yourself good to me, and listen without speaking harshly. You mentioned M. de Préfontaine. Yes, they wished me to marry him. My mother desired this marriage, and my father thought as she did. I had not met Antoine, I did not know what true love is, and M. de Préfontaine was indifferent to me. But my mother pretended



that this was my only chance, and used all her influence to bring about this marriage."

A bitter imprecation burst from M. Noël's lips ; then, seeing that the girl, frightened by his words, suddenly stopped in the midst of her story, he murmured : "Go on, go on ; I am listening."

"And then," she continued, "I was so weary of the life I led ! I do not know whether all homes resemble ours ; there is with us a mysterious constraint that freezes the heart and prevents all intimacy. My father, in his rare moments of good health, spoils me and indulges me without restraint ; but he seems at times as weary of life as if he were condemned to drag a cannon-ball. I tell you all these things that you may understand my situation. My mother has never loved me ; she seems to owe me a grudge for having come into the world ; and I do not feel the same affection for her that other children have for their mothers. But I must appear to you like a monster !"

"No," he replied with a sigh of relief. "And so you were not happy at home ?"

"I was sometimes sad, sometimes wild with excitement, but never at ease. You will now see why I was not at first dismayed at the idea of marrying a man I did not love. M. de Préfontaine offered himself to me ; I neither accepted nor rejected him. This is where I did wrong, for he took my indifference for timidity, and imagined



that I had a fancy for him. He went away, and Antoine came to our house. I loved him from the first day I saw him, and from that time M. de Préfontaine was to me as if he had never existed."

"But why did you conceal from Antoine what was going on? Why did you not break off all connection with Préfontaine?" exclaimed the good man, betraying by his petulance his increasing interest.

"Why? I don't know whether you will understand me, but it seems to me I could readily understand such a case if any one confided it to me. I was so happy in loving, so proud of being loved by Antoine, and esteemed him so greatly, that my happiness frightened me. I feared every moment it would vanish like a dream. I said to myself: 'If I speak, perhaps Antoine will love me no longer; and if I lose him, the joy of my life has departed forever!' And then, you see, I was a coward; I put off my confidence, thinking that by each postponement one more happy day was added to those already enjoyed. I have been cruelly punished. M. de Préfontaine returned on the very evening I had decided to break off my relations with him, and to make a full confession. Before I had an opportunity to explain, he took it upon himself to give his version of the state of affairs to Antoine. Therefore I can never be happy again."

M. Noël, standing in front of the fire, and



shading his eyes with one hand, regarded Raymonde with a mingled emotion of pity and surprise. A magic influence had once more unlocked the mysterious hiding-place shut up in his heart. The remembrances of his youth sent their penetrating odor to his brain. He thought: "Once I was like her; I felt as she does in the days long past, when I too loved." And all his mistrust, all his prejudices, were neutralized by the perfume of true love, which nothing can destroy in souls once impregnated with the divine fragrance.

"I have told you everything," continued Raymonde, rising; "do you believe in my sincerity?"

"I believe you," he murmured, in a tone from which every trace of bitterness had disappeared. He took her hands, and, as he pressed them closely in his own, she felt something warm and moist dropping on her fingers. She raised her head, and saw by the fire-light M. Noël's eyes glistening with tears. "Pardon me," he said, hastily; "I am nervous, I am a fool!"

"Ah," exclaimed Raymonde, "you *are* good! Antoine told me the truth! Why is he not here to listen to me as you are?"

"He is here," whispered the good man.

"Yes, he has listened to you," repeated an exultant voice behind them.

The door leading to the library was suddenly opened, and Antoine rushed into the room. Ray-



monde uttered a cry of amazement, and became very pale.

"Can you forgive me for listening at the door?" said the young man, casting upon her a glance beaming with affection. "As soon as I recognized your voice, I shut up Vagabonde in the den to which I had been banished, and slipped down-stairs."

The girl trembled so that she could scarcely speak.

"Do you forgive me?" she said, at last; "do you still love me?"

"I loved you even when— Ask M. Noël! He saw how miserable I was only a little while ago."

"And now?"

"Now I am as happy as a king, and as light as a feather!" he exclaimed, throwing his arms around M. Noël's neck—"happy, very happy!" he stammered, hugging him till he was almost stifled.

"Let go!" growled the old man; "because you are a fool, it is no reason for suffocating your neighbor."

M. Noël, unable to conceal his emotion, plunged abruptly to the stairway, mounted to the library, and released Vagabonde, who dashed to the kitchen, twisting herself in all manner of ways, and uttering little muffled cries to such purpose that she awoke the raven perched on the cupboard, and they both welcomed the lovers after their fashion.



M. Noël, finding it impossible to keep still, threw armfuls of light wood on the live coals, and the genial flames gave a festive air to the smoky old apartment. The fire-light leaped from the sides of the kneading-trough to the ears of corn hanging from the joists ; it danced on the bottom of the plates, flashed like lightning on the copper saucepans and dusty window-panes, and surrounded Raymonde's pretty head with a radiant halo. Antoine, who had recovered his self-possession in a slight degree, suddenly noticed the girl's disarranged toilet.

"What a condition you are in after being out in the pouring rain !" he exclaimed ; "and how did you manage to get away from the Maison Verte at this hour ?"

She trembled, and her face took on a disturbed expression. She told them of her rupture with Osmin, the quarrel with her mother, and the violence that precipitated the crisis. M. Noël opened his eyes in amazement, and sniffed the air noisily. Antoine became absorbed in thought ; his brow was wrinkled, and his glance grew dark with gloomy forebodings.

"I will go to your father to-morrow," he said, "and entreat him. Perhaps his heart will be touched ?"

Raymonde shook her head.

"My father is not the master," she replied ; "he never asserted his will in his life. He is ruled



by my mother, and will obey her. Heaven only knows what she will advise, for she detests you, and has little love for me ! My obstinacy exasperated her ; she spoke of shutting me up in a convent, and she will certainly try every means in her power to intimidate me. But I have a will of my own, and I will never yield to her plans."

"You are a minor, and consequently under her control. She can shut you up in a convent until you are of age."

"Oh !" she exclaimed, in a rebellious tone, "I would rather throw myself to the bottom of the sea !"

"Raymonde !" Antoine was walking back and forth in the greatest excitement. "What !" he cried, in a passionate rage ; "have I found you only to lose you again ? To-morrow, this evening, perhaps, they will come to tear you away and to separate us for years. They can do so ; the law is on their side."

During this conversation, M. Noël seemed to be entirely absorbed in his own thoughts ; he stamped his foot impatiently, and terrible grimaces gave evidence of his emotion. He burst out on hearing Antoine's last words.

"The law !" he muttered ; "how much do you know about that ? And if I should speak— Well, yes, by all that is sacred, I will speak ! You shall be married. I will take charge of the affair."

"You, M. Noël ?"



Antoine was struck dumb with surprise. Raymonde watched the good man's gesticulations, and wondered if he had not become insane.

"Yes, I myself. There was a time when silence was good ; now it is necessary to speak. I tell you, everything will come out right," he continued, taking hold of Antoine's arm. "You do not understand me ? Pshaw ! there is no need of your understanding. Go back to Auberive, and keep quiet there till to-morrow evening. As to mademoiselle—"

He stopped, looking at Raymonde with an air of embarrassment. The idea of having a woman stay all night at Le Chânois was very annoying. "The deuce !" he grumbled.

He opened the outside door and glanced at the sky.

"She cannot sleep in the open air," he continued, as if in response to an inward objection ; "besides, she must stay here till to-morrow."

He turned to Antoine :

"See, thoughtless fellow, to what extremity your folly drives me ! Where can I find a place for mademoiselle ?"

"I can sleep in a chair," Raymonde ventured to remark, smiling.

"Indeed !" growled the good man with an incredulous look ; "are you in the habit of sleeping in a chair ?"

He went to his chamber, half opened the door,



and stood a moment on the threshold, evidently in great perplexity.

"At last, the problem is solved!" he murmured; then turning to Antoine: "In going home, you will pass the farm—they cannot have gone to bed yet—and you must tell the farmer's wife that I want her to come here to-night. Now, march off!" he exclaimed, pushing the young man out of the door.

"But, M. Noël—"

"Go, and do not forget my commission!"

As soon as Antoine disappeared, the old man turned to Raymonde, who sat perfectly still, and watched his movements with curiosity.

"I will give you my bed," he continued in a tone in which sourness and good-nature were strangely blended; "evil be to him who evil thinks!"

He searched in the bottom of the closet, took out some white sheets, made the bed, and tucked in the bedclothes. In the mean time the farmer's wife arrived, all out of breath. Without paying any attention to her exclamations and looks of astonishment, the good man contented himself with telling her in a low voice:

"Mademoiselle is going to sleep here to-night, and I rely upon you to serve her as chambermaid. You can lie on a mattress at the foot of the bed. As for me, I shall sleep in my chair."

An hour after, everything had returned to its



usual quiet. The only sounds that disturbed the silence were the whistling of the wind in the stairway and the chirp of the cricket on the hearth. M. Noël was installed in his chair, while Vagabonde, posted in front of him, her tail wagging and her ears hanging down, seemed to be asking him a question in her dumb fashion.

“Well! why do you keep looking at me out of your round eyes?” growled the good man, out of patience. “Yes, there is a woman here. There are even two of them. It is just so! Give them an inch, and they will take an ell. That will do; we must go to sleep!”

And he blew out the lamp.

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## XII.

At the Maison Verte they thought at first that Raymonde had taken refuge in her chamber, and for some time paid no attention to her disappearance. Mme. Clotilde took possession of Osmin, and, getting him into a corner, made a last effort to secure the son-in-law of her dreams, who threatened to slip away from her hands, as a trout, already in the weir, by a sudden movement of the tail eludes the toils of the fishermen. The lady employed her most subtle manœuvres and enticing allurements to win him back. In her opinion, Raymonde's resistance was not serious; it



was the rash act of a spoiled and willful child. If no notice were taken of her, she would come to her senses and repent of her folly by the next day. But it was useless for Mme. Clotilde to struggle for the prize; the fish would not bite. Osmin, thoughtful and suspicious, was entirely non-committal. He shook his head, stuck out his lower lip, cracked his fingers, crossed and uncrossed his legs, without breathing a word. He had not the courage, however, to go away. A lingering affection for the girl, and a secret fear of irritating Mme. La Tremblaie, nailed him to his chair. He confined himself to the articulation of indistinct monosyllables, the utterance of a few sighs, while he cast compassionate glances on M. La Tremblaie, who, stretched out in his easy-chair with his chin on his breast and his eyes half closed, was so overcome by conflicting emotions that he seemed to have fallen into a catalepsy.

When dinner was ready, they looked for Raymonde in vain; her chamber was empty. A servant remembered having seen her go out with her head uncovered, and finally every one was convinced that she had quitted the house.

“Where can she have gone on such a night?” demanded poor La Tremblaie. “That child will be the death of me!”

“Bah!” replied Mme. Clotilde, concealing her irritation under a feigned indifference; “perhaps she is hiding among her good friends in the



village. All she wants is to make us uneasy, and give us the trouble of looking for her. It is one of her tricks, and you ought to have become accustomed to them by this time."

But the hours passed, and Raymonde did not return. This was something more than a childish frolic, and the anxiety became serious. The good-natured Osmin, seeing the consternation of his hosts, offered to search for her in the village and surrounding woods. He went out with the servant-boy, knocked in vain at all the doors, plunged into the forest, shouted in all directions in stentorian tones, and returned at midnight, wet, covered with mud, and exhausted, without having found any trace of the fugitive.

The night, as may well be supposed, ended sadly. Préfontaine passed it, stretched on a sofa in the drawing-room. In the morning every one was on foot. It was agreed that they should commence making inquiries for Raymonde at Auberville, and keep on as far as Langres, following up any traces of her flight that might be discovered.

Mme. Clotilde, as usual, threw the whole responsibility of the scandal upon M. La Tremblaie.

"It was," she said, "his want of energy that encouraged Raymonde in such wild folly. The child had a depraved nature, and required to be kept under constant restraint. They did wrong to take her out of the boarding-school. But patience! she would teach her better manners, and



a good convent with strong walls would be the best place for her."

She finished her toilet in haste during these recriminations, passing every moment from the drawing-room to the adjoining apartment, opening and shutting the drawers with great violence, and all the time giving vent to menaces intended for Raymonde.

Meantime, the servant announced that a man wished to see M. La Tremblaie. Before he could send back an answer, the door of the drawing-room was opened, and M. Noël, in his green sur-tout, and with gaiters reaching to his knees, advanced with a nervous step. He brushed by Osmin de Préfontaine, and took a stand in front of M. La Tremblaie. The room was badly lighted; Raymonde's father, who had weak eyes, winked and tried to recognize his visitor, whose strange face and searching glance seemed to disturb him.

"What do you wish for?" he asked at last.

"To talk with you concerning Mlle. Raymonde," replied the other briefly.

"Has anything happened to her?" stammered La Tremblaie. "Where is she?"

"At my house."

"Where did you say? At your house?" cried Mme. Clotilde from her chamber, who had listened to the conversation, and hastened to the drawing-room.

When she raised the curtain, however, and



looked at the new-comer, she grew pale and uttered an exclamation of deep surprise.

"Ah!" said the professor, turning to her; "you have a better memory than La Tremblaie, and you recognized Noël Heurtevant."

"Heurtevant!" murmured La Tremblaie, his lips growing pale and his hands moving nervously on the arms of the chair.

Osmin opened his eyes and looked alternately at the actors in the scene. Mme. Clotilde, quick as lightning, approached the young man, and whispered a few words in his ear. He readily understood that his company was not wanted, and hastened to get out of the way. When he had gone, M. Noël Heurtevant advanced to M. La Tremblaie, who seemed paralyzed with fear.

"You did not expect to find me in this wild country," he said, "and you thought you were rid forever of the troublesome husband whose wife you had taken away? It is one of those chances that make us almost believe in an overruling Providence, is it not?"

"What do you want?" La Tremblaie articulated at last; "what do you demand?"

"Yes," added Mme. Clotilde, who was the first to recover her presence of mind, and determined to carry a bold face in the matter, "what do you want? After keeping silent for twenty years, it will be of little use for you to indulge in foolish



recriminations. There is a law of limitation, my dear !”

“Pshaw !” answered M. Noël, without deigning to look at her ; “you are greatly mistaken. Badly organized as society is, the hour always comes when a man may recover his rights and avenge himself. You see this plainly, for I am here.”

“You will then force me to return to you ? Nonsense !” she exclaimed, shrugging her shoulders.

“Be easy,” he replied, severely. “I have known of your presence in the country for six weeks, and have not come near you. My visit concerns neither you nor me, God be thanked !”

“Whom then does it concern ?”

“Your daughter.”

“Raymonde ?”

“Yes, I come simply to ask your consent to her marriage with Antoine Verdier.”

M. La Tremblaie tried to speak, but Mme. Clotilde would not give him an opportunity.

“Never !” she exclaimed, with great vehemence. “I would rather throw her into the water than give her to this vagabond. Never—do you understand me ?”

“This marriage must, however, take place.”

“In spite of me ?”

“In spite of you.”

“We shall see. Raymonde is a minor, and belongs to me.”



“Much do you know about it !”

“She is my daughter, and I will compel her to submit to my authority.”

“You had better say *our* daughter,” he replied, gravely.

And as she regarded him with a bewildered air, he continued :

“Every one in his turn ! I loved you, and you abandoned me ; I trusted you, and you deceived me. You have lived twenty years tranquilly with your lover, while I was left out in the cold, and made ridiculous into the bargain. Now, not content with having spoiled my life, you attack the happiness of the only human being I love, Antoine, my adopted son ; you refuse to give him Raymonde, whom he adores, and, after having made me suffer like a reprobate, you wish to render him miserable in his turn. Stop there ! I take up my arms ; the law is on my side ; I shall make use of it to accomplish my purpose. The child born during marriage has the husband for its legal father. Our marriage has not been annulled ; Raymonde is my daughter ; I can take her, carry her away, marry her to whomsoever I please—do you understand me ? At one blow I am revenged, and two persons are made happy. You see plainly that you were mistaken, and that there is no law of limitation !”

Mme. Clotilde was stunned for a moment by this terrible and unexpected blow ; but, if she



yielded at first, she resisted all the more violently after having received in full front Noël Heurtevant's final sarcasm.

"Very well !" she replied, in a rage ; "I will drag myself before the courts of justice, and my advocate will blacken your character in fine fashion. You want scandal—you shall have it !"

"The scandal will fall back upon you. I did not wish to noise abroad this affair, for the sake of your daughter and Antoine ; but you prefer to wash your dirty linen in the public square."

"I prefer every kind of humiliation rather than to obey you !"

"You were an unfaithful wife ; you are an unfaithful mother. I am not astonished."

"I have a right to be what I please," she cried, furious ; "but you, you are in my house, and you forget yourself. Begone !"

As she pointed to the door with a gesture full of indignation, her arm was seized by a trembling hand, and La Tremblaie stood erect before her. He was very pale, but his distorted features expressed both indignant pride and disgust, and there was something almost energetic in his glittering eyes.

"Remain, monsieur," he said, in a firm voice ; "you are in my house."

He thrust aside Mme. Clotilde rudely, and she threw herself into an easy-chair. She was con-



quered, and, like most women who are at the end of their arguments, found a vent for her nervous rage in a flood of tears.

"You are right," continued La Tremblaie, heedless of the lady's sobs. "Raymonde must be kept in ignorance of this disgrace; those who committed the sin ought to bear the burden. What do you demand?"

"Your consent in legal form to Mlle. Raymonde's marriage with Antoine," replied M. Noël. "I will meet you at noon in the notary's office at Auberive."

"We will be there."

"Afterward you will come to take home your daughter, who is at my house. The bans will be published immediately, and the marriage will take place as quickly as possible. I depend upon your making such arrangements that everything will go on without delay."

"Yes," murmured La Tremblaie, "and I am ready to make over the dowry that I have settled on Raymonde."

"That is of no use," rejoined M. Noël, haughtily; "we do not want your money. We shall not touch it!" he repeated, imperiously, seeing that he tried to insist.

La Tremblaie bent down his head hopelessly.

"Is that all?" he stammered.

"No," replied M. Noël, in a pitiless tone. "Soon after the marriage the young people will



take up their abode in Paris. Raymonde will begin a new life, and she must be completely detached from the influences which have thus far surrounded her."

M. La Tremblaie understood the conditions, and his eyes were full of tears.

"You are cruel, M. Noël," he answered, "but I submit. Allow that, if I am guilty, I am severely punished."

He sat down overwhelmed, thinking with horror of the existence that awaited him after Raymonde's departure. The professor regarded for a moment Mme. Clotilde bursting with anger, and La Tremblaie sinking under the burden of his sentence.

Yes, Noël Heurtevant was fully revenged, and the punishment was complete. He put on his old hat, and buttoned his surtout.

"At noon!" he repeated to La Tremblaie, and he went out.

He passed slowly through the linden avenue, satisfied with his morning, but grave and almost melancholy. The rain had ceased, a ray of sunshine silvered the foliage already more thinly scattered, and the wind blew the golden leaves in showers across his path. M. Noël quickened his pace, and came in sight of the cross at the forking of the Lamargelle and Auberive roads, when an unexpected sight attracted his attention.



M. de Préfontaine's heavy cabriolet had just reached the summit of the hill, and Osmin, after climbing it on foot at the side of his piebald horse, had taken his seat in the carriage and whipped his incorrigible steed. The animal, weary doubtless with the effort required for the ascent, thought fit to repeat the manœuvre so familiar to his master. He kicked under the whip, and lay down deliberately in the sandy road. Osmin dismounted and searched the usual repository, but it was of no use to turn his vest-pockets inside out. The events that had occurred since the previous evening had made him forget the lump of sugar, and Pigeau, looking in vain for the sweet enticement, continued to spread himself out between the thills in the most obstinate manner. The unhappy Préfontaine, overwhelmed by misfortune on all sides, and weary of resistance, made up his mind to wait Pigeau's pleasure, and took a seat with becoming resignation on a heap of stones in front of his equipage. In this condition of affairs he was joined by M. Noël.

"What is the matter with your horse?" asked the good man.

"Nothing," said the giant; "it is a habit in which he indulges occasionally. The ascent of the hill fatigued him. Pigeau is a good beast, but his back is sensitive." Then he explained ingenuously his horse's whims and the method he employed to induce him to start.



"Sugar!" exclaimed the professor; "you don't know how to manage capricious beasts, and I advise you never to get married! Get into your seat again; I will do something that will surprise you."

He broke off a fine switch from a hazel-bush, started up Pigeau with a few sharp blows, who little expected this change of treatment, and made him step briskly over the road.

"That is the way to manage him!" cried he to Préfontaine.

"Thanks, M. Noël," replied Osmin; then, blushing while the old man continued to lead the horse by the bridle, he ventured to say:

"I would like to ask you one question. Have you seen Mlle. Raymonde? Has anything unpleasant happened to her?"

"Nothing at all! She is perfectly well," rejoined M. Noël.

"Do you think that she will marry M. Verdier?"

"Zounds!" grumbled the good man; "since they have taken it into their heads to adore each other, there is nothing else to do but let them get married!"

Osmin gave utterance to a deep sigh.

"M. Noël," he replied, "when you see her again, tell her I lay nothing up against her, and that I hope she will be happier than I."

He gave Pigeau a sharp blow with the whip,



and the cabriolet soon disappeared on the Lamar-gelle road.

“Worthy fellow, all the same!” muttered M. Noël. “Decidedly, men are worth more than women.”

The marriage of Antoine and Raymonde took place a fortnight after these events, on the conditions imposed by M. Noël. The La Tremblaies quitted the Maison Verte, and a month later a bill on the railing announced the property for sale. No purchasers have appeared thus far, and it remains uninhabited. The young people live in Paris, and spend their vacations with Sœurette. Mme. Clotilde and her companion have resumed their nomadic life at watering-places and gambling resorts. The unhappy La Tremblaie, since he is separated from his daughter, is so changed that he can scarcely be recognized. His nervous disease is much worse, and he will soon be released from the chain to which he is riveted.

Osmin de Préfontaine has never married, thus carrying out the prediction of the shepherd Trinquesse. He makes frequent visits to M. Noël, who has taken a great fancy for him. Vagabonde and Pigeau have become intimate friends. Last autumn I met all four of them on the outskirts of a wood. M. Noël had just gathered a plump and appetizing mushroom, and was trying to



inspire Osmin with his love for cryptogamous plants.

“Admirable vegetable !” he said ; “it has all the virtues, even that of getting along without a woman, and knows nothing of the troubles and tediousness of married life. Take off your hat, comrade, and salute this model of old bachelors !”

THE END.



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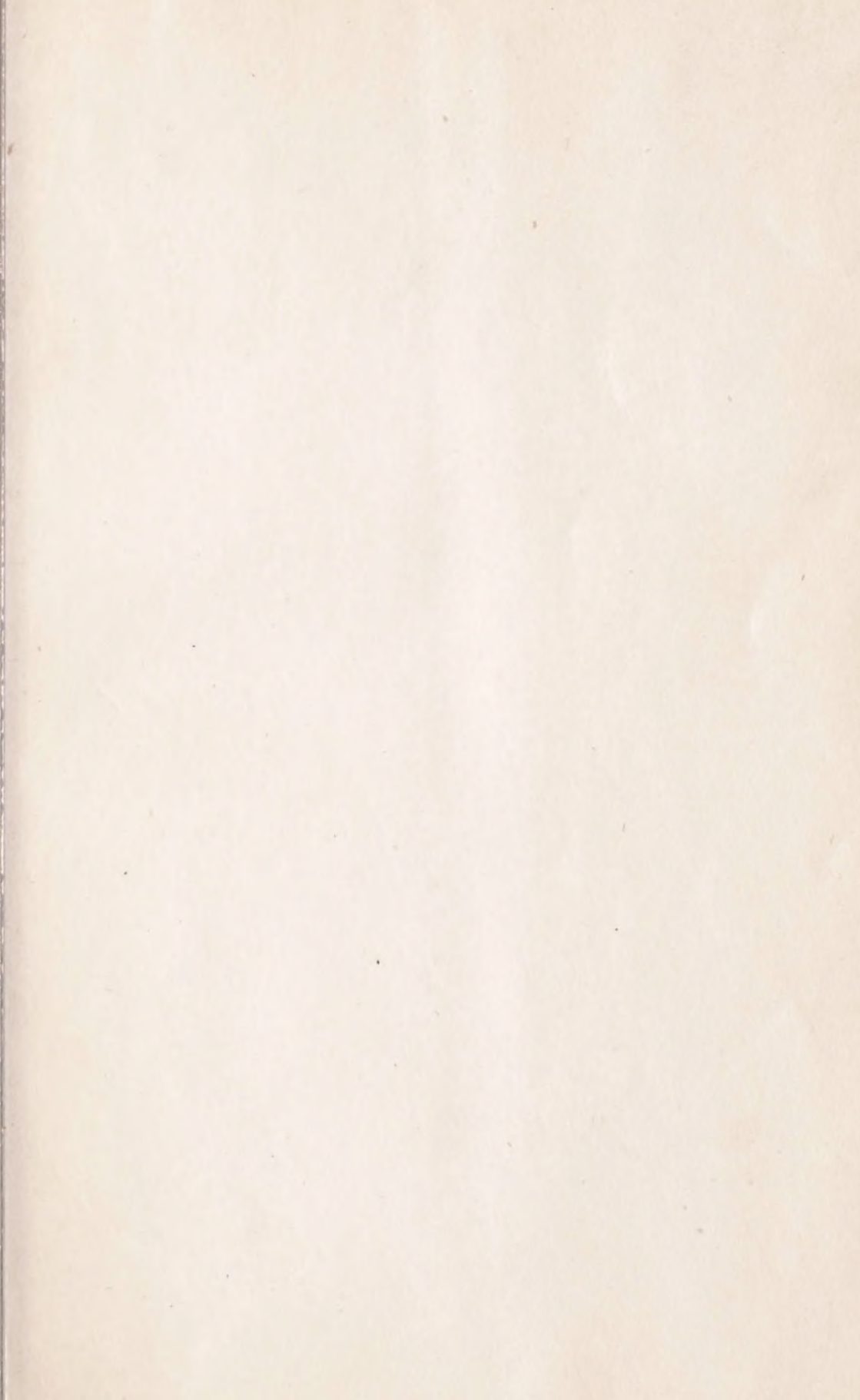




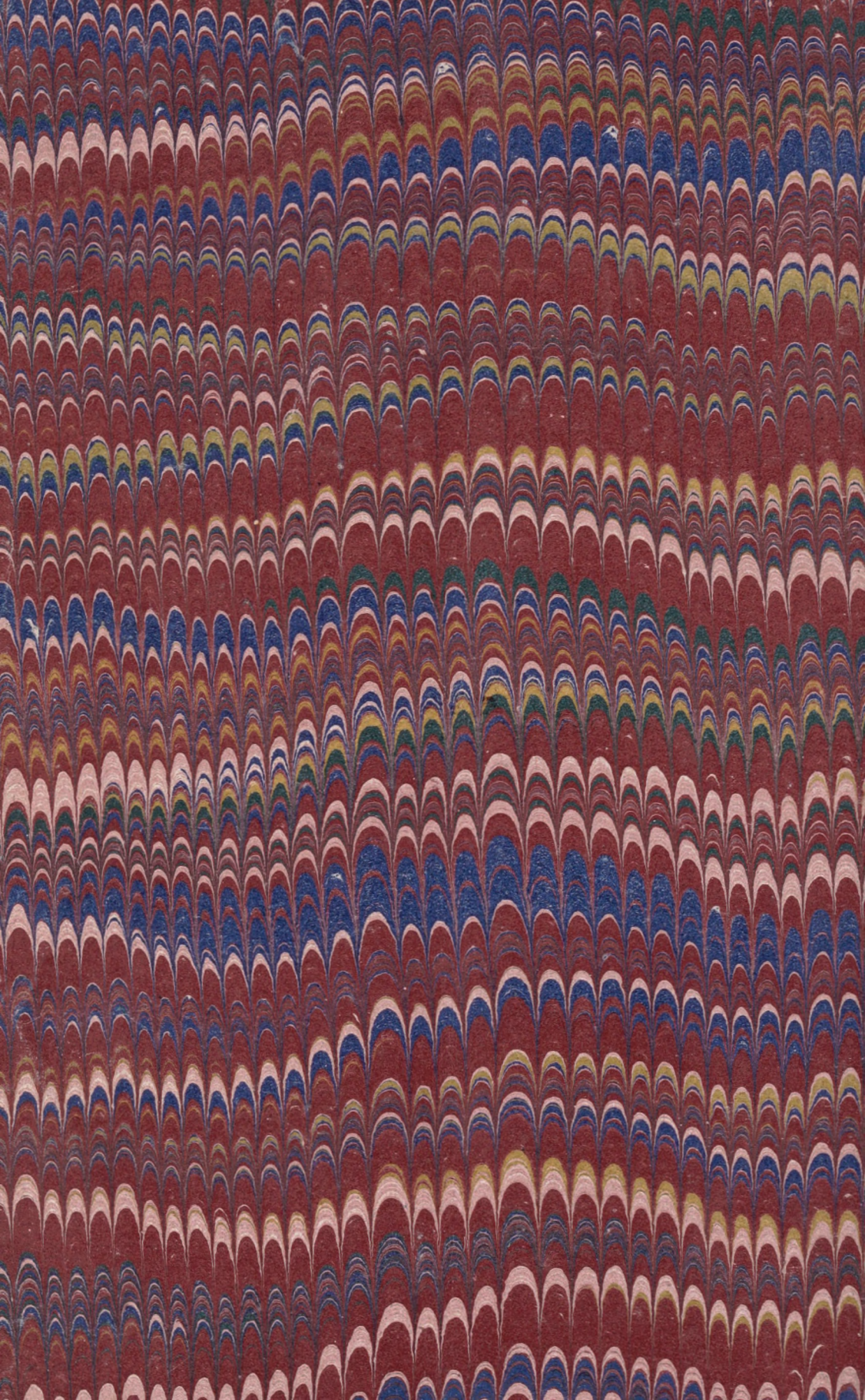




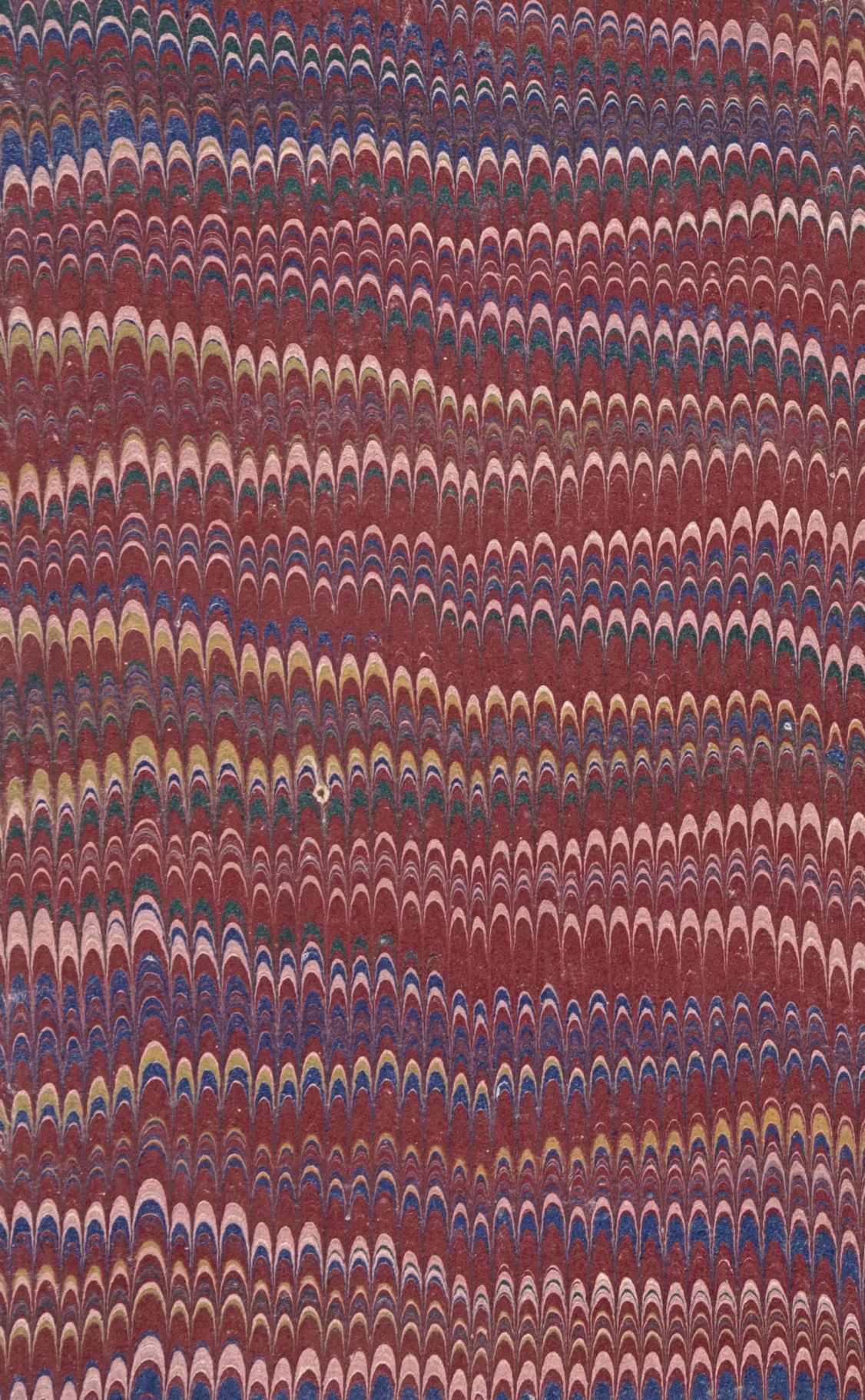














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